The New Criterion

September 1998

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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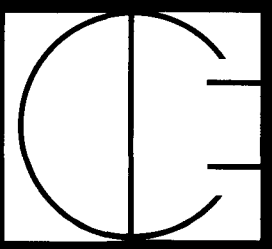

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Notes & Comments: September 1998

Museum fatigue

Seven years ago, in the tenth-anniversary issue of *The New Criterion* (September 1991), we published an article that asked the question: "Has Success Spoiled the Art Museum?" In that article, it was observed that

> Of all the institutions of high culture that have undergone significant change in recent decades, none has been more radically transformed than the art museum. In every aspect of its function, its atmosphere, and its scale of operations, in the character and number of the events that it encompasses, in the nature and size of the public it attracts, and in the role it plays in codifying—and at times deconstructing—our ideas about what art is, the museum has been so dramatically altered in our lifetime that in many important respects it can no longer be said to be the same institution we came to in our youth. And of all the changes that have overtaken the art museum in our time, the most crucial has been the elevation of change itself to the status of a governing principle.

Today, alas, this principle of incessant change seems finally to have reached its logical absurdity by producing an epidemic of professional fatigue in the top ranks of museums, where there are now more vacant directorships and fewer qualified candidates to fill them than ever before.

Of the many factors that have contributed to this dismal situation, surely one is the heedless, headlong pursuit of expansion that has burdened so many of our art museums with the need for budgets so vast, bureaucracies so unwieldy, and publicity campaigns so shameless, that a serious interest in art—and a capacity to make serious judgments about art—has come to seem almost marginal to the most pressing concerns of those charged with directing these institutions. Is it any wonder, then, that some well-known and highly respected museum directors have lately elected to quit the profession to take up offers in the auction houses and the art galleries where, in addition to higher compensation and shorter hours, they are likely to have more daily contact with works of art than is any longer possible for the occupant of the director's office? What these departures from the profession signify is a loss of experience, a loss of connoisseurship, and a loss of mature judgment, all of which are proving to be irreplaceable. Such are the casualties of a principle of change and expansion that has inevitably made dynamism, salesmanship, and show business a more compelling priority than the serious study of art itself.

Runaway expansion in the museum world

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is thus having some of the same effects on the quality of our museums that corporate mergers have had in the book-publishing world. We no longer expect the CEO of a major trade publishing house to have any expert knowledge of books as anything but saleable commodities. We no longer even expect what are still called "editors" in the book-publishing business to function as real editors—which is to say, as "line editors," as they are now demeaningly stigmatized. In some major houses, editors are now actually forbidden to spend their office time at such fundamental editorial matters, which are either "outsourced" or abandoned altogether. All "editors" are now to be "acquisition editors" on the prowl for potential best sellers. The only "line" that now counts is the bottom line.

Museum curators now face similar imperatives in organizing exhibitions. If the shows they have in mind to organize cannot be expected to command media attention on a scale that will register at the box office, curators now know better than to propose them. Box office has become in the museum profession what bestsellerdom has become in the book-publishing industry. What in book publishing is called "buzz," in the museum world is called "sizzle," and we have lately been treated to the spectacle of a major New York museum promoting "sizzle" as its principal appeal in full-page advertisements in *The New York Times*. Aspiring scholars and connoisseurs whose interest in art is not the kind that can be expected to produce "sizzle" will know better than to enter the curatorial profession—and thus the best recruits for future museum directorships will continue to be radically reduced in number. All of which means that the current epidemic of museum fatigue at the top may only be a prelude to greater losses and disasters to come. The crisis in book publishing is already demonstrating what the outcome will produce in the way of lower standards, increased bureaucracy, and declining quality.

A good scam?

In 1987, Charles Simmons published *The Belles Lettres Papers*, a *roman à clef* about his years as an editor at *The New York Times Book Review*. It is certainly the funniest thing ever to have been written about that journalistic organ. It is also, alas, a devastatingly accurate portrayal of the kind of intellectual fatuousness that has made American cultural journalism today such a tawdry business. Of course, *The Belles Lettres Papers* is a work of satire. And even if certain personalities are identifiable, many of the book's most hilarious episodes are clearly a gross exaggeration. They must be. We suppose it is possible—just—that *The New York Times* would, as Mr. Simmons describes in his fiction, someday appoint an ignorant vulgarian as editor-in-chief of the book review in order to intimidate the staff and get rid of people who have outlived their usefulness. But surely Mr. Simmons strains credulity when he pictures this newly appointed editor acceding to suggestions that someone called "John Hershey" be asked to review a new chocolate cookbook or that a book on entomology be assigned to "Gregor Samsa." Such extravagances are scarcely more believable than the rumor going around a few years ago that a top editor at one of New York's most prestigious publishing houses announced a new series devoted to classics of world literature featuring such distinguished translators as "F. Scott Moncrieff." It's amusing to contemplate, but is obviously fantastic.

Reality does have a way of overtaking satire these days, however. And when, in July, we read about the Modern Library's much-publicized list of the one hundred best novels written in English since 1900, we had to wonder whether Mr. Simmons wasn't perhaps a master of understatement. In *The Belles Lettres Papers*, when a company boss called Mrs. Tooling complains that the review doesn't use its literary clout and

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influence effectively, a young editor facetiously asks why they didn't "establish who the twenty-five best writers in America are? One, two, three, four. . . ."

> Mrs. Tooling stared at me and said, "*The twenty-five best writers in America. One, two, three, four.*"
>
> "And no ties," I said.
>
> "*And no ties*," she said. "What's your name?"
>
> "Frank Page, ma'am, but I was only kidding."
>
> She didn't hear me. "Marge, this is what we need. We'll make the front page of *The Times*. There'll be editorials, counterlists. . . . Now we're getting somewhere. One, two, three, four. . . ."

Mr. Simmons imagined a list of only twenty-five names. Harry Evans, the former head of Random House (which owns the Modern Library), wanted a list of one hundred. When the list was first announced, press accounts suggested that a panel of ten prominent writers (including A. S. Byatt, William Styron, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.) had concocted the ranking. In fact, they had been presented with a list of some four hundred titles (including many from the Random House list, e.g., twenty-one books by Gore Vidal) and began by making their selection from that. They did not rank anything until the end, when they were presented with five titles that appeared on everyone's lists and were asked to arrange them in order of merit. These five, as ordered by the panelists, were James Joyce's *Ulysses*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and, most improbably, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The rest of the ordering was done by members of the Modern Library board.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., described the exercise as "a splendid parlor game." For Harry Evans, it was clearly a splendid marketing ploy. Never mind that he hoped to acquire the rights to publish all the books that made it onto the list. The amount of publicity the stunt generated—including, as it happens, front-page and editorial stories in the *Times*, as well as plenty of counterlists—could not be bought at any price. Some people have suggested that Mr. Evans and the Modern Library deserve thanks because, after all, sales of the books that made the list—especially *Ulysses*, which was number one—have soared. In our view, however, the whole episode has a certain Barnum & Bailey aspect to it. This is a fine thing in a circus; it is distinctly less agreeable when what is at issue are not clowns and dancing elephants but serious works of literature. Christopher Cerf, the chairman of the Modern Library (and son of Bennett Cerf, who started the imprint seventy years ago), summed it up perhaps better than he knew: "I think the process is to some degree a scam," Mr. Cerf said, "but it's a good scam. I mean that in the best sense of the word." Our dictionary lists two definitions for *scam*: "a fraudulent business scheme" and "a swindle." We wonder which definition Mr. Cerf considers the "best sense" of the word?

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The betrayal of liberalism, I

by Hilton Kramer

Fifty years ago, in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, Lionel Trilling wrote his once-famous assessment of the place occupied by liberalism in American intellectual life. This is the key passage:

> In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation. This does not mean, of course, that there is no impulse to conservatism or to reaction. Such impulses are certainly very strong, perhaps even stronger than most of us know. But the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.

Notwithstanding the undisguised condescension in Trilling's tone—a condescension toward conservative thought widely shared by liberals at the time—it was not his purpose in that preface to impugn the totality of the conservative intellectual tradition. On the contrary, it was one of Trilling's ambitions in *The Liberal Imagination* to persuade his fellow liberals that they might profit, morally and intellectually, from a careful consideration of the ideas of liberalism's conservative critics. Believing, however, that there was no contemporary conservative criticism equal to the task of reforming liberal thought in the ways he wished to see it reformed, Trilling called upon liberals to perform, in effect, an auto-critique of their own most cherished assumptions based on the wisdom of traditional conservative thought.

This was widely taken to be a heresy at the time, and it instantly earned its author the enduring enmity of the intellectual Left. Yet, in attempting to persuade liberals that "it is not conducive to the real strength of liberalism that it should occupy the intellectual field alone," Trilling cited an unexceptionable liberal precedent—John Stuart Mill's essay on Coleridge:

> Mill, at odds with Coleridge all down the intellectual and political line [wrote Trilling], nevertheless urged all liberals to become acquainted with this powerful conservative mind. He said that the power of every true partisan of liberalism should be, "Lord, enlighten thou our enemies. . . ; sharpen their wits, give acuteness to their perceptions and consecutiveness and clearness to their reasoning powers. We are in danger from their folly, not from their wisdom: their weakness is what fills us with apprehension, not their strength."

To which Trilling added: "What Mill meant, of course, was that the intellectual pressure which an opponent like Coleridge could exert would force liberals to examine their position for its weaknesses and complacencies."

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Trilling's bold project in *The Liberal Imagination* was anything but an exercise in abstract political theory. It was a keenly felt response to a historical calamity. The liberalism of his own generation—the generation that came of age in the 1930s—had been deeply compromised by its abject surrender to the mythology of Soviet socialism. To extricate liberalism from the seductions of the Soviet myth was no easy task, however. Socialism was the ideal toward which all liberal sentiment was inevitably inclined, and for many liberals of Trilling's generation the Soviet Union—whatever its faults or failures—still loomed as the most advanced socialist society in the history of the world.

It was, moreover, in the very nature of Stalinism—as the ideology of Soviet apologetics came to be called—to stigmatize every deviation from its own orthodoxies as a sure sign of "reaction," and there was nothing that liberals dreaded so much as to be publicly demonized as reactionaries. This is not to say that there were no liberals who harbored doubts about the Soviet "experiment," as it was sometimes called. It is to say that, given the immense influence wielded by those loyal to the Stalinist cause, there was often a high price to be paid for the public expression of those doubts, never mind what could be expected to follow from more incendiary accounts of Soviet subversion, terror, and duplicity.

In 1950, the year that *The Liberal Imagination* was published, many liberals in high places—in the government, the media, and the universities—regarded it as a badge of honor to rally to the defense of Alger Hiss, even after he had been convicted of perjury for lying about his activities as a Soviet agent. Abroad, Stalin's minions were exerting an immense influence on the political and intellectual life of Western Europe while embarking upon the military conquest of South Korea, and in Russia itself "Stalin's murderous paranoia appeared ready to soar once more," as David Remnick later reported in *Lenin's Tomb* (1993), with his contriving of the so-called Doctors' Plot—his farewell act of totalitarian terror.

It was in this historical setting that *The Liberal Imagination* marked a turning point in American liberal thought—the point at which a chastened liberalism sought to disembarrass itself of the Soviet incubus. Trilling's was by no means the only or the most politically influential contribution to that endeavor. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center*, published in 1949 and written in the immediate aftermath of Henry Wallace's 1948 campaign for the presidency as the candidate of the Progressive Party, struck a powerful blow in the same direction. "What is the progressive?" asked Schlesinger in a chapter called "The Failure of the Left," and answered as follows:

> The defining characteristic of the progressive, as I shall use the word, is the sentimentality of his approach to politics and culture. He must be distinguished, on the one hand, from the Communist; for the progressive is soft, not hard; he believes himself genuinely concerned with the welfare of individuals. He must be distinguished, on the other, from the radical democrat; for the progressive, by refusing to make room in his philosophy for the discipline of responsibility or for the danger of power, has cut himself off from the usable pragmatic traditions of American radical democracy. He has rejected the pragmatic tradition of the men who, from the Jacksonians to the New Dealers, learned the facts of life through the exercise of power under conditions of accountability. He has rejected the pessimistic tradition of those who, from Hawthorne to Reinhold Neibuhr, warned that power, unless checked by accountability, would corrupt its possessor.

And further:

> His sentimentality has softened up the progressive for Communist permeation and conquest. For the most chivalrous reasons, he cannot believe that ugly facts underlie fair words. However he looks at it, for example, the USSR keeps coming through as a kind of

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> enlarged Brook Farm community, complete with folk dancing in native costume, joyous work in the fields, and progressive kindergartens. Nothing in his system has prepared him for Stalin.

This was certainly audacious for a man with close ties to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party writing in 1949. Yet the liberalism of a "radical democrat" like Schlesinger was not without its own vein of sentimentality, especially where the New Deal was concerned. It was one thing to speak of "Communist permeation" in relation to Henry Wallace's Progressive Party—or, for that matter, in regard to some of the big labor unions, as Schlesinger also did in *The Vital Center*. But it was quite another thing to acknowledge the reality of Communist penetration of the New Deal itself. On that subject, even a staunch anti-Communist liberal like Schlesinger was not prepared to face the worst, then or later, lest he be seen to ally himself with the forces of "reaction," which in this case meant the conservative wing of the Republican Party.

Thus, as late as 1967, at a symposium organized by *Partisan Review* at Columbia University, Schlesinger was still attempting to deny the importance of the Communists-in-government issue by drawing a specious distinction between what had occurred in the New York intellectual world in the 1930s—the focus of Trilling's critique of liberalism in *The Liberal Imagination*—and what had befallen the "pragmatic" New Deal liberals in Washington in the same period, on which subject Schlesinger had himself become our principal mythologist. In regard to the politics of the New Deal, anyway, Schlesinger clearly had no interest in invoking the views of any conservative opponent as a means of forcing liberals, as Trilling had put it, "to examine their position for its weaknesses and complacencies." Reinhold Neibuhr was himself, after all, a bona fide liberal—and Niebuhr was about as "conservative" as Schlesinger was prepared to go in his attempt to reform the liberalism of his day.

By the late 1960s, however, the once potent moral influence of anti-Communist liberalism had been shattered by the radical movement that erupted in response to the Vietnam War. Between the Stalinism of the 1930s and the New Left radicalism of the 1960s, there were many differences in style and tactics, to be sure, but they were alike in one essential respect: in their power to persuade liberals to betray their professed ideals of liberty, democracy, and the rule of law by worshipping at the altars of illiberal gods. Stalin may have been discredited, but in the 1960s Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Tse-tung proved to be equally compelling icons for a new generation of liberals and progressives as eager to succumb to the totalitarian temptation as their elder counterparts had been in the 1930s. Indeed, it was one of the features of the politics and culture of the radical movement in the 1960s to rehabilitate some of the shabbiest reputations spawned by the Stalinism of the 1930s.

Trilling's project to reform liberalism by calling upon it to perform an auto-critique of its own pieties and commonplaces was effectively buried in the culture wars that came out of the 1960s counterculture. But then, so was Arthur Schlesinger's more narrowly conceived political project to reform liberalism by separating it from the simplistic illusions of progressivism buried on the same ideological battleground. "It is one of the tendencies of liberalism to simplify," Trilling wrote in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, and no greater proof of that assessment could have been imagined than the nomination of a simple-minded liberal like George McGovern as the Democratic Party's candidate for president in 1972—a candidate who answered to Schlesinger's idea of the progressive mind in virtually every detail. As a consequence of the politics and culture of the 1960s radical movement, liberalism was itself reduced to sentiments that were now able to express themselves "only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas."

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As a guide to what, in this last decade of the twentieth century, these liberal "mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas" now consist of, consider the reflections of an avowed pragmatist like Richard Rorty, who, in *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Harvard University Press, 1998), offers what he prefers to call the "reformist Left" a program for future renewal. Nothing more opposed to Trilling's call for liberalism to embrace an "awareness of complexity and difficulty" could be imagined. For in Rorty's updated version of the progressive vision, there are no complexities or difficulties to be entertained. All politics is painlessly reduced to a highly simplified Left and Right, and the Left is always right—morally right, even when politically wrong—and the Right is always wrong, morally and politically. Mill on Coleridge remains a closed book.

The contrast between *The Liberal Imagination* and *Achieving Our Country* is made especially piquant by the fact that—as Rorty is eager to tell us—he was himself born into the political and intellectual milieu that did much to shape Trilling's thought:

> My parents were loyal fellow-travelers of the Communist Party right up through 1932, the year after I was born. In that year my father ran a front organization called the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford (the Communist Party's candidates for president and vice-president). My parents broke with the party after realizing the extent to which it was run from Moscow, and so I did not get to read the *Daily Worker* when I was a boy. By 1935 the *Worker* was printing cartoons of my father as a trained seal, catching fish thrown by William Randolph Hearst. But my parents did subscribe to the organ of Norman Thomas' Socialist Party, *The Call*, as well as those of the DeLeonite Socialist Labor Party and the Shachtmanite Socialist Workers' Party. I plowed through these papers, convinced that doing so would teach me how to think about my country and its politics.

Rorty continues:

> As a teenager, I believed every anti-Stalinist word that Sidney Hook and Lionel Trilling published in *Partisan Review*—partly, perhaps, because I had been bounced on their knees as a baby. My mother used to tell me, with great pride, that when I was seven I had had the honor of serving little sandwiches to the guests at a Halloween party attended both by John Dewey and by Carlo Tresca, the Italian anarchist leader who was assassinated a few years later. That same party, I have since discovered, was attended not only by the Hooks and the Trillings, but by Whittaker Chambers. Chambers had just broken with the Communist Party and was desperately afraid of being liquidated by Stalin's hit men.

All of which is quite interesting, of course. Growing up on what Rorty calls "the anti-Communist reformist Left" has meant, among other things, that he never became a Communist fellow traveler himself. It has also meant, in his case, that he takes a very dim view of what he calls "the Foucauldian Left," if only because it has, as he writes, "little interest in designing new social experiments." I am not sure myself that the latter criticism is entirely correct, but it is certainly the case that Michel Foucault's notion of a desirable "new social experiment" would not be in accord with Rorty's.

Nevertheless, Rorty's experience of the "reformist Left" seems to have left him with a permanent incapacity for critical judgment about anything having to do with its social goals. What those goals amount to, in this account, is little more than a vaguely utopian version of the welfare state combined with the imperatives of 1990s-style political correctness. Yet about the woeful failures of the welfare state we hear nothing in this book, and about the coercive measures needed to perfect the kind of politically correct society Rorty enthusiastically endorses we hear nothing either. As a consequence, we are left with the impression that *Achieving Our Country* is neither a serious exercise in liberal pragmatism nor an attempt at political analysis, but something else: a historical romance.

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About the actual history of the political Left in this country, Rorty does indeed have a very romantic view. In a passage that seems to call for something like a revival of the 1930s Popular Front, he implores us to "abandon the leftist-versus-liberal distinction, along with the other residues of Marxism that clutter up our vocabulary," and thus "drop the term 'Old Left' as a name for the Americans who called themselves 'socialists' between 1945 and 1964." As for the old Communist Party stalwarts, Rorty calls upon us to "remember that individual members of that party worked heroically, and made very painful sacrifices, in the hope of helping our country to achieve its promise. Many Marxists, even those who spent decades apologizing for Stalin, helped change our country for the better by helping to change its laws."

For Rorty, "having been 'on the Left'"—never mind which Left—is to have received the political equivalent of a mandate from heaven, and among its saintly recipients he lists Angela Davis and Jesse Jackson along with Irving Howe and Arthur Schlesinger—though not, of course, Lionel Trilling. He also has some kind words for those "socially useful thinkers"—Cornel West, Fredric Jameson, and Terry Eagleton—and grandly forgives them for regarding themselves as Marxists. Those whom he consigns to the "reformist Left" version of the outer darkness make an interesting list, too—"Calvin Coolidge, Irving Babbitt, T. S. Eliot, Robert Taft, and William Buckley." Well, as Trilling said, "It is one of the tendencies of liberalism to simplify."

As might be expected from this cast of mind, in which an exhausted liberalism looks to radicalism in its most extreme manifestations as the only means of renewing its own vitality, Rorty reserves his highest praise for the uproars of the 1960s.

> America will always owe an enormous amount to the rage which rumbled through the country between 1964 and 1972. We do not know what our country would be like today, had that rage not been felt. But we can be pretty certain that it would be a much worse place than it is.

In this philosopher's considered judgment, "the New Left may have saved us from losing our moral identity." If the New Leftists "had *never* taken to the streets," he writes, "America might no longer be a constitutional democracy." And in the name of what ideas or ideals does this champion of the "reformist Left" look to the future?" "Among these ideals," writes Rorty, "are participatory democracy and the end of capitalism. Power will pass to the people, the Sixties Left believed, only when decisions are made by all those who may be affected by their results. . . . When they do, capitalism as we know it will have ended, and something new will have taken its place."

In this pathetic exercise in nostalgia for the old radical pieties, one is vividly reminded of the intellectual bankruptcy that has now overtaken liberal thought and of liberalism's betrayal of its own vaunted values. With a view to reexamining the historical sources of liberalism's current impasse and its implication for a conservative alternative, we shall be publishing this season a series of essays on "The Betrayal of Liberalism." Contributors to this series will include Roger Scruton writing on the origins of the liberal ethos in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau; Keith Windschuttle on liberalism and the writing of history; Roger Kimball on liberalism and the politics of liberty in the writings of John Stuart Mill and James Fitzjames Stephen; Robert Conquest on liberalism and revolution; Hadley Arkes on liberalism and the law; and John Silber on liberalism, culture, and civility. The series will be concluded in our June 1999 issue with an essay by John O'Sullivan on the conservative response to the liberal ethos.

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Delacroix reconsidered

by Roger Kimball

"You are the Victor Hugo of painting."
"No, you are wrong, Monsieur, I am a pure classicist."
—Delacroix to an admirer, 1840

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.
—T. S. Eliot, 1919

One hundred odd pages into *The Development of Modern Art* (1908), the great German art critic Julius Meier-Graefe observes that "to write adequately about Delacroix would be to relate the whole history of modern art." The rest of that magisterial work can be read as an effort to make good on the claim. The more one comes to know Delacroix, the more apposite Meier-Graefe's observation seems. And the more exacting. Delacroix stands like a colossus at the outset of modern art, an ineluctable resource without which van Gogh and the Impressionists, Cézanne, Degas, and Matisse suddenly become unimaginable. And yet Delacroix was far from regarding himself as a bold pioneer. "All the great problems of art," he wrote when he was nearing fifty, "were solved in the sixteenth century." About the passion for novelty—sometimes taken to be the very essence of modern art—he could be particularly scathing: "*The new*," he insisted, "is very ancient, one may even say that it is always the most ancient thing there is."

In fact, Eugène Delacroix is the despair of neat aesthetic categories. Textbooks tell us that he was Romanticism incarnate—"the foremost Neo-Baroque Romantic painter," in the words of one—and they have plenty of evidence on their side. Who but an arch Romantic could have painted *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827, Musée du Louvre), that Byronic homage to decadent Orientalism? The manner—Rubens with a high fever—is as startling as the matter: a doomed, sybaritic king cruelly savoring from his couch of luxury the hasty destruction of all he possesses. And who but a Romantic could have painted *Liberty Leading the People* (1830, Musée du Louvre), that vote of solidarity with the principles of the July Revolution and, by implication, with the Revolution of 1789? This was the Delacroix (or one of them, anyway) who bewitched Baudelaire and unsettled Nietzsche. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche compared Delacroix to his idol-turned-nemesis, Richard Wagner. Both, Nietzsche wrote, were

> great discoverers in the realm of the sublime, also of the ugly and gruesome, and still greater discoverers concerning effects, . . . virtuosos through and through, with uncanny access to everything that seduces, allures, compels, overthrows; born enemies of logic and straight lines, lusting after the foreign, the exotic, the tremendous, the crooked, the self-contradictory.

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Nietzsche spoke as one who knew the seduction, the allurement, the compulsion firsthand. His disapproval was an acknowledgment of potency as well as a warning label. The precincts of extremity that he sent bulletins about were dangerous, but they continued to beckon—were dangerous *because* they continued to beckon. In *Art in Crisis* (1958), the German art historian Hans Sedlmayr, comparing Delacroix to Wagner and to the architect Gottfried Semper, made a similar point: "In Delacroix, we can already see that curious affection for the Oriental which is a mark of that epoch. It is not the Orient as we think of it today. There was for Delacroix and his contemporaries nothing passive or lethargic about it. . . . The Orient to the painters of the forties was luxuriant, sensual and voluptuous, a place of lowering passion and heat."

Delacroix would have been surprised, to say the least, by all this: the accusations of vertiginous self-contradiction no less than the evocations of "lowering passion and heat." "The so-called geniuses that we see today," he wrote in 1855,

> full of ridiculous affection and marked by bad taste as much as by pretension, are beclouded in whatever ideas they possess; even in their personal conduct they continue the bizarre manner which they look on as a sign of talent; . . . The great genius is simply a being of a more highly reasonable order.

The comparison with Wagner would have struck him as particularly odd. For Delacroix, "real superiority . . . admits no eccentricity." Wagner seemed to him—as to many others—to represent the apotheosis of eccentricity. His own first impressions of the composer, recorded in his journal (perhaps the greatest literary testament any painter has left),[1] begin to suggest how extravagant is what we might call the Orientalist-Wagnerian view of Delacroix:

> This Wagner wants to be an innovator; he thinks that he has reached the truth; he suppresses a great many of the conventions of music, believing that conventions are not founded on necessary laws. He is a democrat; he also writes books about the happiness of humanity, books that are absurd.

Delacroix once defined "the classical" as "that which is suited to serve as a model." As for the opposition between classical and Romantic approaches to art, he observed that "a good many artists imagine they are classical because they are cold; similarly there are some who believe they have warmth because they are called Romantic. The true warmth is that which consists in moving the onlooker." One suspects that being identified as "Romantic" was less irritating to Delacroix than discovering that the commendation "classical" was bestowed upon his great artistic antipode, Ingres (1780–1867). Ingres did his best to avoid mentioning Delacroix's name in public; in his writings he tended to refer to his younger rival as "the apostle of ugliness." For his part, Delacroix dismissed Ingres's pretentions to classical perfection as fake: "I prefer," he wrote, "David to this mixture of antiquity with a bastard Raphaelism."

It is a pity that Baudelaire did not have the opportunity to read Delacroix's journal. The poet was one of Delacroix's earliest, most articulate, and most steadfast enthusiasts. And although he recognized the complex nature of Delacroix's art—"passionately in love with passion, and coldly determined to seek the means to express passsion in the manner most visible"—Baudelaire probably did more than anyone to solidify the image

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1 In *The Development of Modern Art* (1908), Meier-Graefe remarks that Delacroix's journal "should be a sort of Bible for young painters." A generous selection from the journal was translated into English by Walter Pach and published under the title *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix* in a handsome edition by Crown in 1937. Delacroix kept the journal for the years 1822–1824, 1832, and 1847–1863. Unfortunately, the entries for 1848 are missing: Delacroix lost the relevant notebook while driving home in a cab from the Gare de Lyon.

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of Delacroix as a kind of Romantic icon. He wrote about the painter's work numerous times, beginning with a notice of the Salon of 1845 and ending, in 1864, the year after Delacroix's death, with a long and appreciative obituary. Baudelaire did not go in for understatement. Already in 1845 he had concluded that Delacroix was "decidedly the most original painter of ancient or modern times." Delacroix's audacious painterly technique—his startling color; the way he, like Rubens and Géricault, exaggerated certain proportions for effect—was part of what attracted Baudelaire. But what really captivated the poet was Delacroix's conjugation of exotic, hitherto incommunicable emotional tones: "a divine opium for mortal hearts." Never mind that, from the beginning, Delacroix's oeuvre had included works of chaste and brooding seriousness—at the 1827 Salon, for example, one could see the somber *The Agony in the Garden* as well as *Sardanapalus*. For Baudelaire, Delacroix was primarily a "fleur de mal," a daring spiritual "beacon" unencumbered by shopworn moral or artistic conventions. Thus he occupies—alongside Rubens, da Vinci, Rembrandt, Goya, and (a startling addition) Watteau—an honored place in "Les Phares," Baudelaire's poetic catalogue of artistic heroes:

> Delacroix, lac de sang hanté des mauvais anges,
> Ombragé par un bois de sapins toujours vert,
> Où, sous un ciel chagrin, des fanfares étranges
> Passent, comme un soupir étouffé de Weber;
>
> Ces malédictions, ces blasphèmes, ces plaintes,
> Ces extases, ces cris, ces pleurs, ces *Te Deum*,
> Sont un écho redit par mille labyrinthes;
> C'est pour les coeurs mortels un divin opium!

Delacroix must surely have been grateful for Baudelaire's constant attentions. Nevertheless, he maintained a certain reserve when it came to the poet and his enthusiasms. Baudelaire is mentioned only a few times—and then only in passing—in the journal, which reveals a sensibility far more steady and far more sober than Baudelaire's evil angels, strange fanfares, and assorted tears, sighs, and blasphemies can accommodate.

It is one of the many merits of "Delacroix: The Late Work"[2] that it definitively complicates the received view of Delacroix as a Romantic archetype. The curators of the exhibition, which was organized to coincide with the bicentennial of the painter's birth, are no doubt right that "passion . . . will ever be at the heart of any discussion" of Delacroix's work. But by focusing on the last thirteen years (1850–1863) of his immensely prolific career (which all told yielded a thousand oil paintings, two thousand watercolors, and nearly a thousand drawings), the exhibition invites us to rethink the nature of Delacroix's achievement. Above all, it has the effect of reasserting the place of deliberation, conscience, and aesthetic delicacy—the elements of mind and culture—in the appreciation of his art.

Another way of putting this is to say that if Delacroix was a Romantic, he was a Romantic in flight from the excesses of Romanticism: a distinctively modern type of the species. There was much about Delacroix's family situation to encourage this amalgam of passion and reticence, exuberance and unfathomable reserve. Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix was born in a small town near Paris on April 1798—year 6 according to the Revolutionary calendar, which was then still in force. He was, by fourteen years, the youngest of four children. The official entry at the *mairie* duly lists Charles Delacroix and Victoire Oeben—who was seventeen years younger

2 "Delacroix: The Late Work" opens at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on September 15, 1998, and remains on view through January 3, 1999. The exhibition was first seen at the Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris (April 7–July 20, 1998). A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Joseph J. Rishel, Arlette Sérullaz, Vincent Pomarède, and Lee Johnson, has been published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and is distributed by Thames and Hudson (408 pages, $65; $48 paper).

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than her husband—as the parents. There have, however, always been doubts about Delacroix's paternity. Charles, an ardent republican who had been a regicide member of the Convention, enjoyed a distinguished political career. His health, at least in his later years, was poor. By August 1797, when he was posted to the Netherlands as an ambassador, he had been suffering for some time from a debilitating tumor (which was successfully operated on in September). His successor as minister of foreign relations was Talleyrand, who took up his quarters at the Hôtel de Gallifet while the rest of the Delacroix family was still living there. Eugène never indicated that he was aware of the rumors, but it was widely bruited that Talleyrand was his real father. As Duff Cooper observed in his biography of the statesman, Delacroix's paternity "was generally ascribed to Talleyrand, and the theory was supported by a strong facial resemblance and by the fact that in the early days of his career the young artist was always in receipt of very valuable patronage and support from some mysterious and powerful source."

Although he early on displayed an interest in painting, Delacroix's artistic vocation did not really coalesce until his late teens, after the death of his mother in 1814. (His father had died nearly a decade before, in 1805). In later life, Delacroix referred to painting as an "exigent mistress" to whom everything else—even the steady stream of *amours* he entertained in his youth—must be sacrificed. But in fact, Delacroix's commitment to art began, and in the deepest sense remained, firmly tied to a broader commitment to the world of high culture. "I have told myself a hundred times," he wrote in 1850, "that painting, that is to say the material thing called painting, was no more than the pretext, than the bridge between the mind of the painter and that of the spectator." As Meier-Graefe noted, Delacroix was "the last great painter who was a man of profound culture." He grew up in a cultivated, though financially hard-pressed, household and early on developed a passion for reading that never left him. His journal makes it clear that Delacroix immersed himself in reading as in a rapt conversation among intimates. Books were one of his chief lifelines to human reality. Corneille, Molière, Racine; Shakespeare, Byron, Walter Scott; Homer, Virgil, Dante, Goethe; La Rochefoucauld; Casanova's *Mémoires*; Plato, Tacitus, Plutarch; Rousseau, Kant, Voltaire, Diderot: Delacroix's reading was as deep as it was wide. He read, criticized, and (selectively) admired the work of his friends George Sand, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, and Stendhal.

Music was also important to Delacroix. He was a passionate devotee of Mozart and Rossini, delighted in Chopin (another close friend and the subject of a penetrating portrait) and distrusted Beethoven. Genius Delacroix possessed in abundance, but his artistic career was a never-ending struggle to subordinate genius to taste. "His lifelong endeavor," Meier-Graefe wrote, "was to find a conventional language . . . capable of fettering his strong expression." Thus Delacroix's intractable duality: "In his facility of dramatic utterance, he was a Romantic, but when his mighty mind had taken its rapid flight through space, the faithful workman followed after, smoothing with almost bourgeois exactitude the road which his lightning invention had struck out in the new domain."

Delacroix left the *lycée* in 1815, when he was seventeen, and entered the studio of Pierre Guérin (1774–1833), a protégé of David. Delacroix stayed with Guérin less than a year—he entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1816—but he owed a great deal to the Neoclassical painter. Among other things, it was in Guérin's studio that Delacroix first met the ill-fated Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), whose dramatic subject matter and correspondingly dramatic sense of composition were a revelation. (Géricault died in a riding accident in London in 1824, just when Delacroix's career was beginning to take off.) In or about 1818, Géricault painted a haunting portrait, now

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in Rouen, of his friend, a remarkable picture in which Delacroix's face hangs like an illuminated mask in a pool of darkness. Delacroix also posed for Géricault's most famous painting, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819). He is a central figure, doubled-over toward the viewer with his head bowed and left arm extended forward. Meier-Graefe called the *Raft* the "cradle" of Delacroix's art. Delacroix would probably have agreed. He recalled that when he saw the finished painting, "the impression it made on me was so vivid that, when I left, I ran home like a madman, all the way to the rue de la Planche where I was then living."

Géricault was one important influence on the young Delacroix; the Louvre provided others: above all Rubens, Veronese, and Michelangelo, whose work Delacroix diligently copied and whose expressive rhetoric he absorbed. From the start, Delacroix's painting displayed considerable technical agility. He turned out political caricatures in the style of Rowlandson, religious pictures reminiscent of Raphael. But he did not become the artist we recognize as Delacroix until he painted the remarkable picture *The Barque of Dante* (Musée du Louvre) for the 1822 Salon. Executed largely while a friend read aloud to him from *The Divine Comedy*—a book that Delacroix often returned to and often illustrated—it portrays Dante and Virgil being driven across a stygian lake in a bark beset by the clamoring damned, some of whom Dante recognizes as former Florentines. Although clearly indebted to *The Raft of the Medusa*, *The Barque of Dante* speaks in a register and with a pathos all its own. Public and critical reaction to the painting can be described as mixed at best. The French government nevertheless bought the painting for a respectable sum—one token, perhaps, of that "valuable patronage and support from some mysterious and powerful source" that Duff Cooper alluded to.

There were other such tokens. An enthusiastic article about Delacroix by the lawyer and diplomat Adolphe Thiers, for example, who was an ambitious political insider known not for his art criticism but for his attachment to a close friend of Talleyrand. In the 1824 Salon, Delacroix exhibited another early masterpiece, *The Massacre at Chios* (Musée du Louvre). This large canvas portrayed a devastating scene from the Greek rebellion against the Turks, a conflict that had captured the imagination of all Europe (Byron perished at Missolonghi that same year). Again, criticial reaction was decidedly mixed (one critic called Delacroix's offering "the massacre of painting"); and, again, the French government purchased the work.

Eighteen twenty-four was something of a turning point for Delacroix. He was lucky to have excited just the right amount of critical consternation. Together with the patronage he received, it assured his emergence as a figure of controversy—then as now a reliable prelude to success. "It was after the *Massacre*," Delacroix explained in a touching recollection,

> that I became an object of antipathy and a sort of bugbear. Most of those who took my side were really only defending theirs. . . . They enrolled me willy-nilly in the romantic coterie, so making me responsible for their folly. . . . I got out of it by dint of not asking for too much and thanks to an extreme self-confidence; that confidence which is the talisman of youth. . . . By this confidence I don't mean a blind presumptuousness. . . . I have never had an exaggerated esteem for what I have done.

Nor in fact did most of the French cultural establishment. For example, it took multiple attempts over the course of twenty years—from 1837 to 1857—for him to win election to the Institut de France, an honor for which he seemed particularly eager.

For Delacroix, the important discovery of the 1824 Salon was the work of John Constable (1776–1837), whose painting *The Hay Wain* (1821) was also exhibited there and made a great impression. In fact, his experience of Constable's work inspired him

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to repaint portions of *The Massacre at Chios* at the last moment. It doubtless also helped stiffen his resolve to visit London. Like many French writers and intellectuals at the time, Delacroix was already what one critic called an "Anglophile on principle." The six thousand francs that he received from the French government for *The Massacre at Chios* made it possible for him to travel to London for the summer of 1825. He met and became fast friends with the painter Richard Parkes Bonington (1802–1828), whose watercolors he greatly admired. (Like Géricault, Bonington died young: he fell victim to consumption only a few years later, when he was twenty-six.) Delacroix also learned to ride while he was in England—an experience that prompted some of his first animal studies. He became an avid devotee of the London stage, especially of Edmund Kean in Shakespeare (another writer to whom Delacroix often returned and whose work he would often illustrate).

It is easy to imagine Delacroix as an ardent traveler. In fact, he traveled remarkably little outside France. Given the large place that "Oriental" themes have in his oeuvre, it is significant that he went to Africa only once, in 1832, when he accompanied a French commissioner on a five-month-long diplomatic mission and visited Morocco, Tangiers, Meknes, and Algiers. During this trip he traveled briefly to Spain. He went occasionally to stay with relatives at Strasbourg; in 1839, he traveled to Belgium and Holland. For the most part, however, Delacroix shuttled between various addresses in Paris and a small house in Champrosay, near Fontainebleau. He never went to Italy at all. Like many great artists, Delacroix was ruthless about his impressions: he exploited them shamelessly. What mattered was not number or extent but depth. Arlette Sérullaz, writing in the catalogue for this exhibition, is no doubt correct that Delacroix was "the first painter to penetrate the heart of Moroccan culture." But that penetration became evident only in the transforming crucible of recollection. Looking back on his trip to Africa some twenty years later, Delacroix noted that "I began to make something tolerable of my African journey only when I had forgotten the trivial details and remembered nothing but the striking and poetic side of the subject. Up to that time, I had beeen haunted by this passion for accuracy that most people mistake for truth."

Not mistaking mere accuracy for artistic truth is one of the polemical, anti-Ingres lessons of Delacroix's art. But it is not the only lesson. Nor can it be understood apart from a larger context in which artistic truth turns out to depend upon a kind of accuracy after all—not the tabulating accuracy of optical versimilitude, perhaps, but that much more rigorous accuracy that consists in strict fidelity to the experience of the object. It was because he believed Ingres failed to achieve—or even aim for—this larger accuracy that Delacroix so deprecated his rival's art. And it is because the counterfeit of such higher accuracy is a staple of much Romantic and post-Romantic art—down, indeed, to our own time—that critics like Nietzsche and Sedlmayr have been suspicious of Delacroix.

This panoramic exhibition of Delacroix's later work should allay such suspicions. It reveals not only the intensity but also the extraordinary variety of Delacroix's achievement. Despite increasingly long and severe bouts of illness—especially the recurrent tubercular laryngitis that he first contracted in the early 1830s and that would eventually kill him—Delacroix was as breathtakingly productive in his later years as he was early on. Indeed, in the last decade and a half of his life he painted a host of exceptional pictures, including what many consider his greatest masterpieces: the public decorations he carried out for the Galerie d'Apollon in the Louvre (1850–51), the Salon de Paix at the Hôtel de Ville (1852–54, destroyed by fire in 1871), and—his ultimate masterpiece—the sequence of murals he painted for the Chapelle des Saints-Anges at Saint-Sulpice (1849–1861) in Paris. Those

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works are of course absent from the exhibition (and two preparatory studies for the Galerie d'Apollon and the Salon de Paix that were scheduled to be in the exhibition turned out to be too fragile to be included). But virtually every other aspect of Delacroix's later work is well represented. The exhibition is divided into seven sections: animal and hunting pictures, landscapes and still lifes, classical allegories, illustrations of literary works, works inspired by his trip to Africa, religious pictures, and "last works," in which a number of earlier themes are recapitulated.

The religious pictures are, perhaps, the greatest revelation. Delacroix was brought up in the secular traditions of the Enlightenment and Voltairean rationalism. "Deism" is one word for this position; but there are those who contend that "Déisme" is French for "atheism." In this context, it is worth noting the remarkable conviction that some of Delacroix's late paintings of religious subjects exhibit. Especially memorable are the series of small oils depicting Christ on the Sea of Galilee (1840–1854)—the stormy sky seems to reenact the stormy drama of the disciples' faith—and two large pictures of Christ on the Cross from 1846 and 1853. As Vincent Pomarède notes in the catalogue, such pictures suggest that the agnosticism of Delacroix's youth was supplanted, not by faith exactly, but by "genuine metaphysical anguish."

Henry James made a similar observation in his review of Delacroix's letters in 1880. Writing about an 1848 depiction of the Entombment of Christ, James said that it was "the only modern religious picture I have seen that seemed to me painted in good faith." Of course, "in good faith" is not the same as "from faith." Baudelaire probably got it right when he observed, in 1846, that Delacroix, "perhaps . . . alone in this century of nonbelievers, has created religious paintings that were neither empty nor cold, like some works created for competitions, nor pedantic, nor mystical, nor neo-Christian." Baudelaire cited the "geniune sadness" such pictures communicated as one source of their power. But it is not, I think, simply a matter of "sadness" or recognition of loss. In that same review of Delacroix's letters, James notes that "the artist we value most is the artist who tells us most about human life." Delacroix's embrace of humanity did not omit the religious dimension of experience—a vestigial feature in the lives of many today, but central to the lives of most of humanity throughout history. Thus it is that he quotes with approval a book on aesthetics contending that "indifference to matters of religion must necessarily bring with it indifference to matters of art." Delacroix's own thoughts on the subject remained tentative and non-doctrinal. "God," he wrote in a famous journal entry from 1862, "is within us. He is the inner presence that causes us to admire the *beautiful*, that makes us glad when we do right, and consoles us for having no share in the happiness of the wicked. It is he, no doubt, who breathes inspiration into men of genius, and warms their hearts at the sight of their own productions."

In some ways, Delacroix's achievement is bracketed by the furious energy of his animal paintings on one side and the meditative calm of certain of his literary and historical allegories on the other. Delacroix was without doubt one of the greatest painters of animals—especially of large cats and horses—who ever put brush to canvas. Not only did he manage prodigies of anatomical suggestiveness—his many trips to the zoo at the Jardin des Plantes gave him ample opportunity for observation—but also even his quickest sketches communicate a sly, tightly coiled animal passion.

One of the highlights of this exhibition is the *Lion Hunt* which was commissioned by the French government for the 1855 Exposition Universelle. Upon leaving the Salon, the painting was sent to the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux, where it was damaged in a fire in 1870. Even in its fragmentary state, however, it is a marvel of painterly energy. "Never," Baudelaire wrote in his review, "have more beautiful or more

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intense colors penetrated to the soul through the channel of the eye. It is as if this painting, like the practitioners of magic or hypnotism, projects its thought from a distance. This remarkable phenomenon is owing to the power of the colorist, the perfect concurrence of tones and the harmony between the color and the subject."

As this passage suggests, it was as a colorist that Delacroix tended to impress his contemporaries and artistic heirs most dramatically. Though, again, not always favorably: about the *Lion Hunt* the French critic Maxime Du Camp wrote that

> color here is at its most extravagant and verges on raging madness; and there is complete disregard for harmony, since all of the tonal values are about equal. . . . Monsieur Delacroix will endure neither as a history painter nor as a painter of genre scenes. . . . As a classical writer once put it: Monsieur Delacroix is the leader, not of a school, but of a riot. This Lion Hunt is the height of eccentricity and does its utmost to rival the grotesque.

Du Camp was not alone in his condemnation. But history has confined his opinion of Delacroix's color to the minority—to, perhaps, even the crankish. Far more typical was Cézanne's comment about *The Women of Algiers* (1849): "The color of the red slipper," he said, "goes into one's eye like a glass of wine down one's throat." Delacroix's technique involved a proto-pointillist maze of tiny brushstrokes in which a rainbow of hues built up a vibrating skin of color. Delacroix's friend Théophile Silvestre recalled that, "instead of simplifying the local colors by generalizing, Delacroix multiplied the tones *ad infinitum*, and opposed them to one another in order to give each a double intensity. His color sparkles like a stream spattered by a shower." Unfortunately, this is one aspect of Delacroix's art that generally seems to have reached us in a diminished state. Delacroix often complained about the quality of the pigments he used. We know that he tended to use rather cheap colors, and comparing his canvases with descriptions up to the early decades of this century it is difficult not to conclude that his pictures have suffered considerable darkening. In pictures like the *Lion Hunt*, the fury remains but not, I suspect, quite all of the brilliancy.

Delacroix's animal pictures tend to exist at the Romantic end of his emotional palette. At the other end are many of his allegorical scenes. One of the most arresting is *Ovid Among the Scythians* (1859) from the National Gallery in London. It portrays the moment when Ovid, the very embodiment of cosmopolitan sophistication, arrived at his place of exile at the bleak fringes of the Roman Empire in what is now Romania. For us, who know that Ovid's exile was destined to be a life sentence, it is a portrait of quiet but intense melancholy. Delacroix's muted tones and depiction of vast mountainous perspectives conspire to reinforce the sense of desolation that civilization feels when confronted with irremediable barbarism. This was not the first time that Delacroix portrayed this unhappy scene from Ovid's life, and the delicacy with which he treated the subject—together with the philistinism that Delacroix often felt surrounding him—tempts one to regard it as something of a spiritual self-portrait or confession. Its pertinence to the cultural situation today makes it even more poignant.

One of the curators' finest decisions was to include as a kind of *hors d'oeuvre* the commanding self-portrait that Delacroix painted in 1837. Although it does not belong with the late works that are the focus of the exhibition, the picture does provide an illuminating cross-perspective from which to view it. Painted when Delacroix was nearing forty, it exudes an intense, challenging confidence, seductively worldly yet serious to the point of disdain. If it greets the visitor, it does so in a spirit as admonitory as it is welcoming. This is not a portrait of a Romantic, but of one who has triumphed over Romanticism: one whose vocation is not, in Eliot's phrase, the "turning loose of emotion" but its purgation and redemption through art.

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Magnifying old mistakes: the situation in France

by David Pryce-Jones

Raymond Aron was a worthy heir to the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Writing with a force and lucidity which no other Frenchman of his generation could equal, he stood for democracy in the dangerous decades of the Nazi and Communist threats to the West and its civilization. It is a reflection of the times that the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, which lays claim to authority, has space for assorted Nazi and Communist dupes and sympathizers, but not for him.

Twenty years ago, Aron founded *Commentaire*, a journal to promote democratic values through debate at the highest intellectual level. To celebrate this anniversary, today's editors (Aron died in 1983) have invited contributors to comment on two principal themes: the present situation in France and whether it is valid to equate Communism with Nazism.[1] Regarding the former, they ask specifically, "Do you feel sorrow, resignation, anger, satisfaction or joy? Or again, shame or pride?"

The contributors, between seventy and eighty of them, include Jean-François Revel, Marc Fumaroli, Alain Besançon, and others with established international reputations. Taken together, they are a formidable body of professors and opinion-makers, maestros of the think-tank, and almost without exception products of the celebrated colleges of specialized education which have hardly any parallels in other countries. One of them, Antoine Jeancourt-Galignani, is a banker as well as an economic advisor to the mayor of Shanghai: a portent of the world to come. The discipline of their training does them justice. Their responses are prodigies of information, analysis, and rhetoric.

Invited to surrender at Waterloo, the commander of Napoleon's elite troops is supposed to have replied, "La Vieille Garde meurt, mais ne se rend jamais," that is, the Old Guard dies but never surrenders. These contributors are also something of an Old Guard, patriots and conservatives, holding the idea that there was an "*exception française*," a French particularity too self-evident and valuable to need justifying. This particularity seems on the verge of extinction.

Events will soon prove them right or wrong about this, but it is a matter of urgency and importance that so many first-rate intellectuals express dismay and even alarm about the France currently taking shape. As so often with elegy and lament, there is an accompanying sense of fatality. Fine as far as it goes, this issue of *Commentaire* reveals an Old Guard more disposed to surrender than to make a last stand for the values which have sustained France and the French for so long.

Diagnosis is not the difficulty. The French monarchy of old set in place a centrally controlled order, with no concern for public

1 *Commentaire: revue trimestrielle*, vol. 21, no. 81 (Spring 1998), edited by Jean-Claude Casanova; Plon, 317 pages, 150 FF.

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opinion. The revolutionary universalism of 1789 also necessitated central control, but the concept itself was incompatible with the nation-state which emerged side by side from the same events, unbridgeably dividing the believers in the one from the believers in the other—Left from Right—for two long centuries. Out of injured pride, the costs of victory in the First World War and the costs of defeat in the Second World War have never been properly reckoned. During the subsequent Fourth and Fifth Republics, the French empire ended with violence in Vietnam and Algeria, and there was the potential for violence and disintegration at home, notably in 1958 and 1968.

To cultivate one's garden seemed sound advice in the circumstances, and successive postwar governments accordingly built one of the most comprehensive and expensive welfare states in the world. Centrally ordered, universalist in aspiration but nationalist in practice, and immune to costs whether real or psychological, this welfare state and its appetites has had the unexpected outcome of replicating and magnifying every contradiction and flaw of the past.

The resulting crisis comes in various forms: social, cultural, economic, and political. Unaffordable spending on social services combines with intensive regulation to impede the creation of wealth and to solidify the very poverty which welfare is designed to eliminate. Unemployment persists at almost 13 percent. Farmers, truckers, railwaymen—any group threatened with loss of privilege and public funding—immediately take to the streets in selfish defiance of the general interest. There are at least four million immigrants from North Africa, and many of them remain lifelong dependents on welfare. In reaction, the National Front, under Jean-Marie Le Pen, a demagogue in the purest Thirties mold, receives a vote of 20 and even 30 percent in municipal and regional elections.

Enthusiasm for Hitler and Nazism split prewar French conservatives into irreconcilable blocs, so preparing the catastrophe of 1940. Rising racism is repeating this suicidal process, this time shrinking and even delegitimizing the remaining Gaullists or conservatives. Further destroying social cohesion are other more technical factors, chief among them the constitution, which was designed by General de Gaulle to suit himself. This provides the president with a seven-year term, no less, and renewable at that. Weighted so heavily in favor of the executive, the de Gaulle constitution has blurred the separation of powers, weakening the National Assembly, which in any case was a feeble legislative body, and further subduing the already highly politicized judiciary. In a strange anomaly, the president may belong to one party, the prime minister and the government to another. The ensuing stand-off, known as cohabitation, places all concerned at the mercy of unaccountable power-brokers and bureaucrats behind the scenes.

During the fourteen years of François Mitterand's presidency, corruption and cronyism flourished at unprecedented levels. The scandals were unrelieved. Mysterious sudden deaths occurred in high places. Ministers and industrialists were exposed as freelance mafiosi, but even when arrested for fraud they usually did not end behind bars. No bank ever was so bankrupt as the Credit Lyonnais, no airline ever so massively subsidized as Air France. Deregulation, privatization, and the market were widely held to be mere ruses whereby an imperialist America and a malicious Britain—otherwise that conspiratorial entity *les Anglo-Saxons*—were out to wreck France. Anti-Americanism flared like marsh-gas (and even some of the contributors here release whiffs of it). Policy narrowed to two single objectives: the yet wider establishment of the welfare state, and the construction of European unity.

Today a nominally Gaullist president and a Socialist prime minister stagnate in cohabitation. The welfare state appears untouchable. The electorate is invited to think

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that European unity is set in marble. If the gathering premonitions are warranted, then the French are losing command of their destiny.

Whatever is the remedy? According to the more pessimistic contributors, the case is hopeless. Several of them speak of France as irredeemably decadent, the sick man of Europe. In one of the most thoughtful and eloquent of these essays, Alain Besançon accepts that there are "no more solutions." For him, the country is blocked in an attenuated version of Brezhnev's Soviet Union. The Right has been fragmented beyond recovery by the National Front, the Left is ineducable. Besançon alone has the courage to ask whether the Muslim immigrants can be assimilated, and, if so, on what terms. The historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie also suggests that the professionalization of unemployment, as he calls it, allows France rightly to be compared to the Soviet Union.

In Alain-Gérard Slama's view, French society has decomposed into tribes with selfish claims, amounting to free-for-all extortion. In a startling image, Marin de Viry likens the country to a blind man feeling for an electric switch in a splendid but darkened library. Didier Maillard and Christian Saint-Etienne are convinced that the determining factors are in place for a major and violent explosion in the near future, which they date to 2005 or thereabouts.

A common assumption is that the culture as a whole is exhausted. The Catholic church, the education system, and the concepts of the family and citizen in the welfare state are perceived as so many sell-outs, instrumental in subverting the moral values inherent in French particularity. "The less we speak to other people about our literature," in the words of Besançon, "the better we are for it." The few who are talented remind him of Soviet dissidents. In this entire issue of over three hundred pages set in small print in double columns, no contemporary poet, novelist, painter, sculptor, or architect earns a mention in any context. Karol Beffa, however, claims that there are young composers who may heal the breach between melody and atonal music. "Mémoire du français" ("The Memory of French") is the title of Michel Zink's obituary of the language itself, which he fears will leave only its literary beauty to resonate in the minds of a chosen few. Should this be so, one of the world's high artistic mediums will have come to a standstill.

A number of contributors say that courage and intelligence should be enough to deal with these obvious and manifold ills. To them, a good dose of politics is the first prerequisite of revival. Institutions are man-made. The constitution can be rewritten, to limit the power of the presidency and exclude cohabitation. It is possible to strengthen the National Assembly and the judiciary, to overcome prejudice against the market and *les Anglo-Saxons*, and to reform the welfare state.

Two politicians participate in this symposium. Raymond Barre and Laurent Fabius—both former prime ministers—are believers in tightening some administrative nuts and bolts, while loosening others and greasing the whole machinery with clichés. Later in the magazine, former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing contributes a paper he wrote for a colloquium elsewhere on Edmund Burke, a thinker wholly alien to the French tradition, from whom he concludes rather comfortably that it is possible to introduce change which will not really affect continuity.

To be personal for a moment, I can hardly bear to accept that the pessimists might be right, and French particularity is foundering. Very few people who consider themselves civilized could even imagine a France which no longer had inspiration to give the world. By temperament, by force of will, surely the optimists will carry the day, and reason must prevail?

Hesitation and doubt arise because of a persistent failure of intellect, best described as *le trahison des clercs*, in Julien Benda's long-famous phrase. Treason lay in the

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abandonment by intellectuals of the democratic values which so privileged them and their society. This has been a dark feature of French particularity since 1789, when the revolution defined the concept of good as a universal that all must accept, if not of their own free will, then under compulsion. As the rival claims of universalism and the nation-state fought for supremacy, the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity were betrayed time and again.

The period between the World Wars saw the highwater mark of betrayal by intellectuals, in all the democracies to be sure, but in France more furiously than elsewhere. There were conservatives who warned where Hitler and Nazism were leading. For one, Raymond Aron, who was a specialist in German philosophy, made it a duty to visit Germany to gather the evidence at first-hand. But the slogan popular on the Right, "Rather Hitler than Blum," laid the intellectual justifications for Vichy and collaboration with the Nazis. In no other country under German occupation was the climate of informed opinion so openly and willingly pro-Nazi.

In the name of its version of universalism, the French Communist Party simultaneously attacked the French state and all it stood for. Its leaders, its members, and the fashionable troop of fellow travelers were unmatched in their polemical skills, as well as in their subservience to Stalin. Once more, serious credentials and talents were placed freely at the service of tyranny. With rare exceptions, the loyalty of Communists and fellow travelers survived even the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, and they became anti-Nazi only when Hitler himself rounded on the Soviet Union in 1941.

After the war, a National Committee of Writers, self-appointed and for the most part Communists, drew up lists of their colleagues, *semblables et frères*, to be shot for collaboration. As Soviet armies occupied central and eastern Europe, and the rather marginal democracy there was uprooted and potential democrats were deported or murdered, French intellectual opinion hardened in support of Stalin. Paris became the leading foreign propaganda station for Moscow. Sartre, Eluard, and Aragon were only the most prominent personalities to lie knowingly about Soviet reality. A judge in a French court came to the verdict that the Gulag did not exist. The slogan to leave its mark was "Better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Aron." It was not immoral or inhuman, then, to describe mass-murder as progress.

This betrayal persisted through the Cold War, until the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* forced Soviet reality into the light of day. Even so, Soviet sympathizers have preferred to turn the page rather than apologize and make amends. François Furet is one exception, but his book *Le Passé d'une Illusion* tends to argue that though Communists like him were wrong and wicked, they could have done no other.

No satisfactory analysis exists of this Janus-headed betrayal of democracy by so many supposedly independent-minded intellectuals. Were they played-out people, as Hitler, cruel as usual, said of the French? Did the hope of reward drive so many toward what looked like the winning side, first the Nazis and then the Communists? Perhaps these were early incarnations of radical chic.

A further question follows. Since democrats everywhere have taken such pains to bring Nazis and their sympathizers to account, why are efforts to treat Communists and their sympathizers by the same standards so half-hearted? Last year, for instance, *Le Livre noir du Communisme*, edited by Stéphane Courtois and others, itemized the crime sheet of Communism. One way or another, they estimated that eighty-five million people had been killed, some five or six times as many as the victims of Nazism. The figure was reached by scholarly methods, but the surrounding furor was so intense that several of the editors and contributors repudiated their own work, in an echo of Stalinist self-criticism.

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In another seminal article published elsewhere (and in translation in *Commentary*, *Commentaire*'s New York namesake, in January 1998), Alain Besançon has come to grips with this phenomenon. Communist distortion of reality was so deep that it remains embedded in historical consciousness. It is a human reflex to avoid rethinking difficult and painful things. But the chief obstacle to moral clarity, he concludes, is that the conscience of the West has become "fixated on finding the seat of absolute evil in the heart of the West itself." He allows himself the hope, the prayer, that in time the truth about Communism will be as evident as the truth about Nazism.

Apologia, a last gasp of fellow traveling, surfaces at this point. Those who still prefer to have been wrong with Sartre than right with Aron claim that Nazism and Communism are alike only superficially. The one totalitarian movement murdered in the name of race, and this was retrograde; the other murdered in the name of class, and this was progressive. Jean Daniel, a veteran leftist, does what he can in his essay to separate out the tyrannies in form and substance.

A section of *Commentaire* sweeps aside such specious distinction. Margarete Buber-Neumann, German-born, had the fate of experiencing Nazi and Soviet camps. An admirable memoir of hers, first published in 1950, has been reprinted under its self-explanatory title: "Which is worse? Satan or Beelzebub?" In another essay, Pierre Chaunu clarifies the parallels between the evil twins, as he calls them: belief in revolutionary activism, a single party-state, absence of law, secret police, and falsification of events. He, too, believes that some internalized but misplaced sense of Western guilt is behind the reluctance to bring Communism to account. In passing, he observes that Communism killed more people than smallpox and the plague combined.

Chantal Delsol has a profound argument to put forward. Communists have neither asked for pardon nor admitted culpability, but their victims have apparently forgiven them nonetheless. Yet without confession, repentance must remain uncertain. Seemingly, responsibility for Communist crime is held to be collective, not the fault of the individual. So people come to relativize politically motivated crime at a time when in other respects they are setting up universal moral standards. The paradox contains a threat to all notions of human advancement.

Decaying slowly as it did, Communism mutated into the doctrines variously proposed by Lacan, Althusser, Baudrillard, Barthes, Robbe-Grillet with the *nouveau roman*, Derrida, Foucault, and the deconstructionists and postmodernists—intellectual betrayers, not to say quacks, one and all. With an uncritical fidelity reminiscent of Soviet fellow travelers, they and their innumerable imitators have sustained a campaign against reason and rationality by relativizing knowledge and morality, reversing cause and effect, abstracting the human being, and asserting a reality without reference to the real world.

Here is a deep wound, self-inflicted and suppurating, first upon the body of France, but then far beyond. A journal with the aims and standing of *Commentaire* surely could have found someone to spell this out, to purify and heal through a critique of this intellectual betrayal. These bogus reputations have done so much to make the present situation what it is, yet not one of them is even mentioned, never mind refuted.

It is further disconcerting that contributors like these pick to shreds the malignancies of Mitterand's presidency and the Socialist welfare state, but then do not bring the same elegant rigor to bear over the other crucial aspect of national policy, the insistence on the construction of Europe. Originally Europe was to mark perpetual peace between Germany and France; and after that to be a free-trade area; and finally and theoretically, after great and even painful adaptations, a free market on the lines of the Anglo-Saxon model. Out of fear of a

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Germany unexpectedly reunited in 1989 and a lack of confidence in his own people, Mitterand changed the objective. European union now had to advance, according to a strict timetable, toward a federation, though its final form remains to be agreed upon.

Everything political, social, and economic has had to be harmonized and standardized throughout Europe: one-size-fits-all, never mind history or geography, culture or language. Monetary policy, interest rates, and unemployment levels are no longer conceived as national issues, but settled instead abroad by committees of other nationals. European law is decreed by a European Court of Justice, which in an expanding number of areas has established its supremacy in any conflict with national law. The French governing elite presents all this as a French victory, while the German governing elite simultaneously presents it as a German victory. Both can be wrong, both cannot be right.

The European Union structure of administration happens to be in Brussels, concentrated in a tight core of some twenty-five thousand permanent officials. Other countries in the European Union are perforce handing more and more policy-making over to Brussels, but the French do so with a tenacity all their own. In a number of respects, Brussels is Paris writ large. The system operating there, that is to say, is monarchical, displaying a central control which Louis XIV would envy. The elementary features of democracy are missing. There is no separation of powers, no accountability, no appeal. The legislative body meets in secret and does not publish its proceedings.

An accelerating juggernaut has been constructed by harnessing the fact of central control to the old revolutionary ideal that for their own good men are to be made over in the image that their master has for them. Brussels operates a continental-scale welfare state through a complex network of subsidies, transfer payments, grants, and aid. Regulations by the tens of thousands bind everywhere all aspects of industrial, commercial, and social intercourse, down to trivia in what had hitherto been considered spheres with which the state had no business. So much for the free market. So much for freedom itself. Billions more dollars vanish into the pockets of the power-brokers and invisible officials who in practice now dispose of Europe. This is a command-bureaucracy, absurdly like Brezhnev's Russia, the second time round, as tragical farce.

Every country in this enterprise is obliged to bear immense costs of adaptation, in real terms, and no less expensively in the national psyche, in its view of itself. The French have their special dilemma. Whether through the hazard of events or by conscious design, they find themselves caught in the contradictions and flaws of the past, replicated and magnified yet again. Universalism as practiced in Brussels is in conflict with the particularity embodied in France and the nation-state so absolutely that in the end one of these concepts must kill the other off outright.

Almost unanimously, the contributors to this symposium are ready to accept Brussels-driven universalism at face value. Not a single one of them makes a principled objection to the command-bureaucracy and its anti-democratic nature. They seem to believe that the emerging federation will resolve the social, political, cultural, and economic ills they have dissected as specific. So at the center of this general discussion about the current situation of France is a huge gap in logic: since final decision-making lies with every passing week more and more in the hands of others, whatever is the point of the French bothering their own heads about how to reform themselves? In essentials, and in accumulating details, too, they have already committed their future to Brussels, and can now recover it only through an upheaval whose fallout cannot be predicted.

Two writers alone defend French particularity. In the view of Pierre Manent,

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France has to expect only "humiliation, dispossession, and mutilation" from the construction of Europe. In the light of history, Max Gallo questions German intentions: is this European Union really the lion lying down with the lamb? Or will the command-bureaucracy be powered by the Germans, a kind of latterday Wehrmacht occupying Europe again, in civilian disguise? In any case, Gallo would rather not owe anyone anything, even if he were to be poor and deprived. For him, it is a matter of pride and self-respect.

The speed and ease with which so many thoughtful men, unquestionably democrats and patriots, have abandoned French particularity is as baffling as the collapse of France in 1940. What is the origin of their pervasive and almost fatalistic acceptance that France must transform into something else? As then, one possible reason seems to carry further than others. In the manner of pro-Nazi precursors in the Thirties, the National Front has compromised the ideal of the nation-state to the point where those who would normally defend it are afraid that patriotism and democracy will be mistaken for nationalism and impotence respectively. Sabotaged, they are unsure where to turn, how to regroup. In Germany, too, neo-Nazis are eroding the right-wing vote. In the absence of articulate expression of mainstream opinion, the deceptive universalism of the European Union goes unchallenged. This makes for a political vacuum, and in the event of extremists in France or Germany actually filling it, of course, a national and a European catastrophe will be at hand.

Another slogan forms: "Rather Brussels than Le Pen." That is almost certain to translate in practice as "First Brussels, then the general backlash against it." The thugs sign up for nationalism and racism; voters retreat into apathy; intelligence has been betrayed again; and the country hangs in the balance between self-renunciation and violence.

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The entertainment state

by Mark Steyn

A month or two back in Ottawa, ministers from a couple of dozen countries got together for a big forum on "culture"—and, more specifically, on how to protect each "distinctive national culture" from being swamped by the global dominance of America. It might have been interesting to hear the American perspective on this but America wasn't invited—because, said Canada's Heritage Minister sniffily, there was no U.S. cabinet minister responsible for culture. Which is to say that even Bill Clinton's Washington doesn't think it worth appointing a cabinet secretary whose job it is to attend first nights.

Anyway, with America absent, Canada and co. were free to devise new ways to ward off the sulfurous odors of Hollywood, as manifested by, say, the blockbuster *Titanic*. Who directed *Titanic*? A Canadian, James Cameron. Who sings its ubiquitous theme song? Another Canadian, Céline Dion. Indeed, Mlle. Dion, who spends most of her time south of the border these days, is one of the principal beneficiaries of the *dirigiste* Dominion's present regime of cultural protectionism. Under Ottawa's onerous "Canadian Content" regulations, 30 percent of the music played on every radio station must be homegrown—which means that, whether your format is rock, easy listening, country, or Gregorian chant, you wind up through necessity expending a lot of your airtime plugging Céline's themes for American movies. It's an object lesson in the pitfalls of trying to protect "culture." Let us not begrudge Mlle. Dion her success: a monolingual Francophone from Québec, she has become the supreme practitioner of an extremely lucrative *jeux sans frontières*—the big, bombastic pop ballad—but let's not pretend, simply because of the passport she travels on, that there's anything distinctively Canadian about that. Céline has succeeded because the distinctive things—the Québecois things—have gradually been ironed out by her canny minders. And, in a way, she's not such a bizarre beneficiary of this cultural affirmative action: for Ottawa's regulations are so ludicrous that inevitably a handful of shrewd operators will figure out a way to clean up. Aside from being an affront in a supposedly free society, "CanCon" is mediocrity by Government diktat: it's patently absurd to pretend that one out of every three great country and western songs is Canadian; that one out of every three great jazz trumpeters is Canadian; that one out of every three great symphony orchestras is Canadian. . . .

And yet, and yet. . . . When Sheila Copps, the Heritage Minister, told her fellow cultural commissars that those countries in the path of the Hollywood juggernaut had to find ways to ensure that "we can tell our own stories," it struck a chord. At the time, we were in the middle of the interminable build-up to the release of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, and I found myself suddenly weary of the 101st Airborne and

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the 2nd Rangers and pining wistfully for a tale of derring-do—just one would do—in the Royal Canadian Air Force or Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. In America these days, the present is so overwhelmingly present that the past rarely gets a look in until someone—usually Spielberg—makes a movie about it. To judge from supposedly serious outlets such as National Public Radio, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*, D-Day would appear to be some obscure event lost in the mists of time until Spielberg's years of diligent research uncovered it. It's part of the formalization of entertainment in American society: just as John Travolta's and Barbra Streisand's pronouncements on current events are listened to respectfully at the White House, so too Hollywood's line on past events must be accorded respect. Spielberg, we were told, had brought World War II to the attention of a younger generation, though it seems more likely he would have merely confused them: World War II? Wassat, Dude? The sequel to a film we missed first time round?

Nonetheless, almost all commentators agreed that Spielberg had done a splendid job bringing home the "realities" of the war. Really? From a non-American perspective, the reality of the war is that almost every other country lost, relative to the general population, more troops than the U.S.: the British, for example, lost proportionally three times as many as the Americans; even the Canadians, having been in since 1939, lost some 35 percent more. The reality is that the comparative painlessness of the now despised traditional American war movie is not, in the broader sense, inaccurate: the American soldiers who landed in Normandy were among the most comfortably supported in the history of warfare. In the Soviet forces, for every fighting man at the front there was one man at the rear maintaining supplies and so forth; in the British and Commonwealth armies, the ratio was one to three; in the U.S. forces, one to nine. This is not to belittle the contribution of those on the beaches, but only to observe that, if you want to make a film about the carnage and chaos of warfare, D-Day is far from the most obvious case. And, if you turn D-Day into a nightmare, what does that leave for true military debacles?

Thanks in part to the caution of Allied planners, across America there are thousands of towns relatively untouched by the bedlam of the Second World War. You can't say the same about, for example, the English Midlands. Yet this year the only film those Midlanders will get to see about "their finest hour" is *Saving Private Ryan*. History is supposedly written by the winners, but pop history streamlines the process even further. According to those ministers in Ottawa, the rest of the world's culture is under continuous siege. A few years ago, I asked a young cousin of mine in Ontario what she was reading at school. It was something called *Project Z*—or as she called it, *Project Zee*. "Don't you mean *Project Zed*?" I asked. "I guess so," she said, "but we all watch *Sesame Street*," against which even Canada's alphabet is at a disadvantage. Another small point: in British TV comedy sketches set in courtrooms, the judge invariably bangs a gavel. British judges do not have gavels to bang. But, for every drama set in a local courtroom, British audiences have seen thousands of "Perry Masons" and "Murder Ones," and the gavel has stuck.

Perhaps because non-Americans are used to being the first thing written out of the script, they're more attuned to the other winnowing that goes on. As much as anyone who wasn't there can understand it, I'm told by D-Day veterans that, as you scramble ashore, you're dimly aware, on the periphery of your vision, of comrades falling around you, but you've got your own life to look out for, you're trying to stay focused, you're not clocking every gushing artery, every splintered skull; there'll be time enough later, if you're lucky, to take a human inventory. But Hollywood is in the simplification business: in Spielberg's so-called "realistic" D-Day sequence in *Private Ryan*, we see nothing but one individual

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death after another, in detail. Every action is ignoble: when our boys eventually reach the enemy bunker and set it afire, the Germans come scrambling out, screaming in agony, and the American shouts to his men, "Don't fire! Let them burn!" This isn't reality, it's fashion.

But big deal: that's the nature of the beast. My own reality check only kicked in when the plot got going. As everyone on the planet knows if only from the publicity campaign, in *Saving Private Ryan*, General George C. Marshall, apprised that a mother in Iowa has within a week lost three of her four sons in action, decides to send a mission to rescue the fourth, dropped somewhere behind enemy lines. Spielberg may have given us the first "realistic" war movie, in which the severed arteries gush like real arteries do, but so what? That's just ketchup—set decoration. In every important respect—the concept, the motivations, the emotional impulses—the film is ludicrous, no more than the projection of our own Oprahfied values onto the past.

As it happens, my father-in-law and his two siblings were in not a dissimilar situation: they didn't die, but, after two of the three were blown up, the youngest finished off the war for them and eventually returned home still with two legs, which is more than his brothers could muster between them. On D-Day, he was in a glider that delivered him, like the much-sought-after Private Ryan, deep behind enemy lines. I cannot conceive that, in a million years, Field Marshal Montgomery or any other British commander would have sent an expedition to retrieve him and return him to the bosom of his family. And, even supposing that someone in the Imperial General Staff had undergone some sudden I-feel-your-pain Clintonian conversion, if my wife's uncle had returned to her grandparents in such circumstances, they'd have told him to pull himself together and sent him back to the front. In other words, I don't believe you can make a "realistic" Second World War movie if every character in it thinks in a 1990s way.

But who am I to argue against America's greatest historian? Consider, for example, Spielberg's last picture, *Amistad*. This is "an extraordinarily important film," at least according to Spielberg—and as he's the director, presumably he knows. So to coincide with the film's opening, the DreamWorks studio supplied America's schools with a "learning kit" for use in history classes. *Amistad* was "based on a true story": in 1841, the mutinous Africans of the slaving ship *Amistad* came before the Supreme Court where they were successfully defended by John Quincy Adams. Adams was in the Spielberg movie, played by Anthony Hopkins. So was Theodore Joadson, the heroic Negro abolitionist played by Morgan Freeman. The DreamWorks "learning kit" asks pupils to analyze the "complex relationship" between Adams and Joadson. It is certainly complex—at least from an educational point of view: although Adams existed, Joadson didn't; he's an entirely fictional creation. Doubtless the DreamWorks people regard this as less of a problem than conventional historians would: after all, the *Amistad* "study guide" is peppered with inspiring quotations by Adams, not one of which ever passed his lips, mainly because they were cooked up by Spielberg's screenwriters a century and a half after the guy died. Yet, who can doubt that, insofar as America's children emerge from high school knowing anything about this episode of history, it'll be from the DreamWorks "learning kit"? In America, dreams work—all too well. Filmmakers defend this approach by saying it's like Shakespeare "shaping" his kings. Fair enough—except that the Bard wasn't burying Stratford-upon-Avon Grammar School under a ton of *Richard III* "learning kits." Unlike Spielberg or Oliver Stone, Shakespeare had a sense of proportion: he knew he was show biz.

That genial comic figure, Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., recently observed that the phenomenon known in America as "globalization" is called by the rest of the world "Americanization." The rest of the

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world may be wrong on this one; from even the briefest consideration, Americanization doesn't seem terribly American, at least not as we would once have understood the term. For all we're told that film is a visual shorthand, what most of us like to cite from old movies are the great lines—the "Frankly, my dears" and "You know how to whistles." A picture like *Casablanca* is one sustained rally of muscular vernacular—"Of all the gin joints in all the towns. . . ." "Round up the usual suspects." "You played it for her, you can play it for me." But there's no point making that kind of film anymore. America is the purveyor of entertainment to the entire planet, and most of the planet isn't up to "Round up the usual suspects." So the industry's geared up to moron events like *Godzilla*: despite a yearlong promotion and its opening on more screens than any other film ever, only four people in America and a couple of testosterone-pumped iguanas wanted to go see it. But who cares? It's not made for America, it's made for the world. America is a salutary reminder that, for all the fretting of those loser countries up in Ottawa, sometimes you can be *too* good at pop culture.

In that sense, the United States is the principal victim of Hollywood. The rest of the world watches American entertainment at one remove. In America, that's not possible: it devours everything, including your own history. Indeed, it *becomes* your history. Whatever the merits of their arguments, such films as Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* were at least antiwar films. Insofar as *Saving Private Ryan* has anything to say at all, it's an antiwar-film film: it exists only in relation to other war films, to such now discredited trifles as *The Longest Day*. Spielberg has said in interviews that the film is antiwar, but, on being pressed as to whether he was seriously anti-*this* war, he murmured that some wars are necessary, and certainly, without this one, there would have been no baby boomers or Generation X. As a coherent "message," this was reminiscent of Dave Clark's rock musical *Time*, in which the planet is up before the intergalactic court for having committed crimes of war and hatred, and British pop singer Cliff Richard, counsel for the defense, pleads in mitigation that Earth has produced one force for good—rock 'n' roll—and that because of this we shouldn't be consigned to oblivion. The rock generation's sense of its own worth and its own historic mission is indestructible: look at Dave Clark or Spielberg . . . or the president.

The United States is the first society in human history whose principal industry is leisure—entertainment, amusement, diversion. And, since it is an industry, we should consider it in industrial terms. Increasingly, America is like a nineteenth-century industrial town: the dark Satanic mills bring us the jobs and money we need, even as they choke our skies and poison our lungs. The flotsam and jetsam of American pop culture—the entertainment superhighway, the entertainment-industrial complex—hang in the air all around us; we're breathing it in every minute. I don't mean the more obviously noxious fumes—the gangsta rappers and pornographers about whom conservatives usually complain. It's sad that rap's main consumers should be white middle-class boys living on tree-lined suburban cul-de-sacs, and faintly shaming that the richest society on earth can endow their childhoods with nothing better than a lavish wallow in ugliness. But the mortality rate among rap artistes seems to be taking care of the problem for itself: happy the gangsta rapper who lives to celebrate fifty years in show business. Besides, few cultural critics give the American people credit for their extraordinary resilience. Despite the mainstream media assuring them that these works are masterpieces, whenever films like *The People vs. Larry Flynt* or *Boogie Nights* expand their releases beyond a handful of metropolitan fleshpots, the American public stays away: Mr. and Mrs. Front Porch don't want to know. If Hollywood's foolish enough to believe the reviews and keep making films glorifying pornographers, it'll

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be out of business soon enough. They are no threat. But it's harder to resist the slipperier products of mainstream pop culture—the Spielbergs and Disneys—whose effects are far more pervasive. Neither Larry Flynt nor Snoop Doggy Dogg could get elected town clerk or school board chairman in 99 percent of the American municipalities, but the blandishments of Bill Clinton proved harder to resist.

President Clinton is the final confirmation that we live in an entertainment state: not only because he has reduced the presidency to mere entertainment, or because he sits far more comfortably on the late-night monologues than on the early-evening news, but also because his fellow entertainers are latterly the only folks who can get to see him (apart from interns and Chinamen). He won't speak to journalists or ordinary citizens, but he'll happily spend a weekend in the Hamptons as a guest of Steven Spielberg and Alec Baldwin. The media never ceased to jeer at Ronald Reagan for inviting Hollywood pals round to the White House, but at least they were real pals, chums from the acting days. Bill Clinton's reason for hanging with celebs would seem to be that they're the source of the shrewdest insight into foreign and social policy and, in modern America's remorseless convergence of politics and show biz, the only persons of appropriate stature for the president to meet.

His predecessors felt obliged to put up with scientists, sculptors, architects, and worthy earnest left-wing artistic directors of regional theater companies. But when this president throws a state banquet for the British prime minister, all he needs are Spielberg, Streisand, Tom Hanks, and, for the cabaret, Elton John and Stevie Wonder duetting on (of all things) "Money—That's What I Want." When dear old Tina Brown, like a knicker-wetting bobbysoxer, goes wobbly-kneed and gushes of the president, "He is vividly in the present tense and dares you to join him there," she may be on to something. He, we, the country are vividly in the present tense, and, like Casey Kasem counting down the Top 40, nothing else matters except what's here and now. During the last presidential election, a perplexed Bob Dole, losing primaries to a talk-show host, muttered that he'd been "in the real crossfire"—not on CNN but over in Italy. But he missed the point. In an entertainment state, metaphor counts more than reality: a TV "Crossfire" outpunches a historical one. A man who professes to "feel your pain" is more caring than a man who has quite enough pain of his own to feel. A war hero means less than a war filmmaker.

If you want a word for it, call it sappiness—the sappiness of Hollywood applied to every other area of American life. The scientific data decline to provide proof that secondhand smoke is harmful, but what's science got to do with it? Morality—in the woozy, supple Hollywood sense—is on your side, so go ahead anyway and declare the case "proved," in the interests of saving "all our children," in whose name every bill is promulgated, sometimes literally (Megan's Law). The values of Spielberg movies—the avoidance of harsh truths—now infect every significant area of American life, not least the feminized military. If you think Spielberg's D-Day is messy, try scrambling ashore with pregnant combat troops and HIV-positive combat troops because your political overseers think it "sends the right signals."

That's the curious thing about the new national entertainment state. In theory, a pop regime ought at least to be populist. Yet, in practice, it seems even more distant from its subjects than traditional aristocracies. So, on the weekend when the FBI labs were testing the president's former intern's dress for (as the coyer papers put it) DNA, the chief of state flew off to the Hamptons to stay with the Spielbergs and to party with film stars Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger: the late, and at times equally embattled, Emperor Caligula couldn't have turned in a more seemly display of executive decorum. Clinton's America is the merest variation of that famous *New Yorker* poster: in the

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foreground, the A-list Hollywood big shots; behind them, a few fashionable gay, feminist, and minority pressure groups; and, beyond that, on the distant horizon, the mass of the American people.

In an entertainment state, everything has to be validated by celebrities—even something as basic as citizenship. The 1997 Presidents' Summit for America's Future would, according to Bill Clinton, "redefine citizenship" and, according to Oprah Winfrey, shrugging off the president's stunted vision, "change the world." Its subject was volunteerism: how to maintain and strengthen what has been one of the Republic's most distinctive characteristics, to a degree unmatched in Western Europe or anywhere else—the willingness of the ordinary ungarlanded citizen to serve his community in a variety of ways. So who did the Summit produce to urge us on? Not the Ladies' Aid Society or the Boy Scouts or the Utility Club or the 4-H-ers, but instead pop singer Michael Bolton and former child star turned "education advocate" Brooke Shields. John Travolta was there, too, lunching with President Clinton and Colin Powell to persuade them that America's schoolchildren would be more civic-minded if they were taught the works of L. Ron Hubbard. It is, of course, rather easier to "volunteer" between twenty-million-dollar-per-gig film roles than between, say, thirty-two-dollar waitressing shifts. Yet the centrality of show business in American public life is so universally assumed that no one organizing this wretched non-event seemed aware of its exquisite condescension.

One would hope that Bill Clinton himself now understands the limits of the show biz state. Those who attack his recent difficulties as a "trivial distraction" are missing the symmetry: the grim protracted decline through his second term, over the most investigated fellatio in the history of the world, is the inevitable corollary of the airy rise of his first term, through sax-blowing on *Arsenio Hall*, Blues Brothers impressions with Al Gore, underwear discussions on MTV, cameo roles on disease-of-the-week TV movies. . . . The first pop culture president has belatedly learned what his pal Michael Jackson, for one, could have told him: those who live by pop culture generally perish by it, too. His trivial fall is only a trivial distraction from his trivial rise. And, if the rest of the world seems bemused by this investigation, we shouldn't misunderstand the reason: in a parliamentary system, he'd have been gone months ago. Alas for the Constitution, there are no checks and balances against the black arts of pop culture—of spin and perception and image.

So, contrary to Shelia Copps and co., the rest of the world enjoys a great advantage by contracting out the dissemination of junk culture to the United States. Lapped up at one remove, as a foreign import, it's relatively harmless: its values don't contaminate everything else you do. It's like contracting out your landfill to the neighboring town: why get involved in this game if you don't have to? That conference in Ottawa got things precisely the wrong way round: the entertainment machine is not America's strength, but its weakness. I emerged from *Saving Private Ryan* grateful that Hollywood has no interest in "telling our stories"—that it's too busy trampling America's past to get around to trampling Canada's, or Britain's or France's or Gabon's. There's a lot to be said for countries whose histories haven't yet been appropriated by Hollywood and its "learning kits," countries which perforce can never exist so vividly in the present tense as Bill Clinton's America. Canadians should be heartened that global pop culture couldn't care less about the RCAF or the Princess Pats. It means that, with a bit of luck, maybe one kid in a thousand will discover them the old-fashioned way—fired by an enthusiastic history teacher, or stumbling upon a dusty volume at a yard sale. Yes, it's a long shot. But better to let your stories go untold than mis-told.

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Poems
by Joe Bolton & Peg Boyers

Page

Here is my page, half darkness, half silence, hoping
To find at last the way to you I could not find.

It contains all my boredom, sickness, and desire,
Those things I said in drunkenness, in rage or love.

Like water, it holds its drowned who are without names.
Like time, it was just a way of passing the time.

It lied now and then—I confess—for your pleasure:
Some misguided aim of overcompensation

For what was not only enough but too much.
Reliance upon language was its undoing. . . .

But someday it will be all that is left of me.
Death bothers its margins like gulls along some shore.

Tucson, Arizona—March 20, 1990

—Joe Bolton

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Soon

Soon, these great stadiums will be empty,
Standing coolly at twilight, lit only
By the twilight, and there will be no sound,
No echo, and no memory of sound.

Soon, these mansions along North Boulevard
Will fall into disrepair, then will fall,
Their foundations given over to grass
Under the vaulted naves of the live oaks.

These freeways won't dream of rush-hour traffic.
These towers won't give you the time of day.
These storefronts won't show the season's fashion.
Nobody will try to take your money.

Soon, no one will remember how it was
To drive home at the end of the long day,
To hear a song you thought you'd forgotten,
To sleep and rise and not know quite what for.

And no one will remember what it was
To try to live and love and make love live
In these times we belong to but call ours,
Near the end of what looked like forever.

after Horace

—Joe Bolton

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Hell & back

to an ex-friend

I nearly died once in Oxford, Mississippi,
And nearly died in Houston.
The water's gunmetal tonight in Kentucky
Under the pittance of a moon.

If you've been dead long enough
Who died here, maybe you could tell me
Whether the water down there's strong enough
To get as drunk on as we used to like to be.

—Not that talk's forgiveness, never that.
There's been too many changes, too little change.
But you know how lonely it can get
Here by Johnathan Creek Bridge.

For what it's worth, I lost the woman
I fought you for trying to take. I hear
No sound of a voice, nobody swimming,
But that's all right. I understand. Stay there.

—Joe Bolton

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The first thing to go

spoken in the voice of Natalia Ginzburg

The first thing to go is the neck.
That's where it starts: gravity pulls,
the grave extends its reach, yanks at the tendons,
strings them out, distends the flesh.
The cheeks give in, drop to the jaw, become jowls.
Jowls, you say, my father's jowls.

This is the turning point.
No spring left to resist
dust's desire to make more dust.
After this defeat, the rest follows:
bust and butt racing in a cavalcade
to the finish.

How you had laughed
at middle-aged *crises*, assumed
your horse-face
would spare you the pretty girls' ravaged
future. Calmly, you awaited the change,
superior in your plainness.

Manly, your brothers teased. *Brutta*.
You cried and prayed for delicacy
to visit your coarse features, soften
the nose, round out the chin. You wanted
wide-set eyes like Athena, gray-blue
and fine. Not the two hunks of coal

that burned even closed. In vain
you hushed your deep voice, hid it
in a whisper, developed a shy laugh,
plucked your bushy brows,
grew long nails and hair.
Your brothers were not fooled.

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When the time came you'd shuck the pretense,
embrace the man within, let him
save you from humiliation. A masculine
triumph over menopause. Let the brothers
be right. Give in to the game. Become handsome.
This was your plan.

Meanwhile you learned
certain wiles. Creamed your face
in secret. Avoided soap. And hoped, always hoped.
But the neck you scrubbed mercilessly, the way
you scrubbed your collars to remove
the shameful stain of makeup.

Now its dry flesh looks back at you
from the mirror, puckering its reprimand,
stark and insistent: yes, it says, yes,
you, too.
You have become what you had never dreamed of becoming:
old.

—*Peg Boyers*

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Art

A Degas doubleheader

by Karen Wilkin

Edgar Degas will always be one of the most enigmatic of artists, but if you haven't managed to bring him into sharper focus over the past decade, you haven't been paying attention. On this side of the Atlantic alone, starting with a full-scale retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in 1988, Degas has starred or played a leading role in a series of provocative exhibitions clarifying particular aspects of his evolution and setting him in context. Think of the revealing show of Degas's little known landscapes, the survey of the early years of Degas and his colleagues, "Origins of Impressionism," or the celebration of Degas as a collector, all seen at the Met over the last five years. Think, too, of the 1996 examination of Degas's late work at the Art Institute of Chicago. And this spring and summer, if you went to Williamstown or to Washington, D.C., you could deepen your understanding of two more of this absorbing and apparently inexhaustible artist's continuing obsessions: dancers and horses.

The Williamstown show, "Degas and the Little Dancer" at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, revolved around one of Degas's most loved and, as it turns out, misunderstood works, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*.[1] In Degas's own time, as today, this curious, unforgettable figure was among his best known works. It was the only one of his sculptures exhibited in his lifetime, and, after his death, more than twenty bronze casts were made after the original wax. But the *Little Dancer*'s fame has less to do with her near-ubiquity than with her strangeness. She is at once arrestingly real and wholly artificial, utterly convincing and full of contradictions. A recognizable individual with a broad face and a short nose, slim adolescent arms and lanky legs, she sports a fabric tutu and a carefully tied hair ribbon seemingly appropriated from the everyday world. She is, however, startlingly smaller than life size, which signals that she belongs entirely to the realm of art. Every button of her bodice and every wrinkle at the knees of her prelycra era tights have been recorded by Degas's acute eye and nervous fingers, implying long duration and long scrutiny, but her pose is tense, transient, a momentary stretch, not a prolonged, comfortable posture.

If the public regards the *Little Dancer* as appealing and a little puzzling, art historians regard her a challenge. There's something for everyone. Those concerned with technical matters have unravelled the details of

1 "Degas and the Little Dancer" opened at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, on June 2, 1998 and remains on view until September 7. The exhibition was seen at the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha (February 7–May 3, 1998), and will travel to the Baltimore Museum of Art (October 4, 1998–January 3, 1999). A catalogue of the exhibit, by Richard Kendall, has been published by Yale University Press (192 pages, $50).

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producing bronze casts from the original wax without destroying it. Feminists have examined the complicated transactions between dancers and their "protectors" in the late nineteenth century. Others have discussed the place of this seemingly anomalous object within Degas's oeuvre. And so on. The questions are endless, all the more so because Degas himself left almost no written records or observations.

When Degas first exhibited the *Little Dancer* in 1881, his contemporaries were also perplexed. Confronted by a rather rigid, poised wax figure, only a meter high but complete with wig, muslin skirt, and a "leek green" satin bow, and displayed like a precious artifact in a specially designed vitrine, viewers searched for precedents with which to compare her. Some found analogies in popular culture, likening her to a shop window mannequin or a monstrous doll. Others saw her as an homage to the past and connected her, perhaps because of her symmetrical, open-legged stance and her museum-style display case, with Egyptian antiquities. Still others saw her as entirely modern, a new kind of sculpture, while another contingent was apparently unable to get past the specifics of the image and complained about her depraved expression. They were shocked by Degas's new brand of realism not into a meditation on the aesthetic qualities of his sculpture, but into speculation on the degrading aspects of being a performer in late-nineteenth-century France.

Richard Kendall, the indefatigable Degas scholar who organized "Degas and the Little Dancer" for its first venue, the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha (he was the curator, as well, of the shows examining the artist's landscapes and late works), takes all of these responses seriously in an effort to reclaim some of what *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* meant when it was first shown. Kendall aspires to get closer to Degas's intentions, which remain ultimately unknowable. At the Clark, to Kendall's credit, the impeccable selection of intricately related works in all media—paintings, drawings, pastels, monotypes, and sculptures—succeeded in making you look at the *Little Dancer* differently, with better informed eyes. In this context, the sculpture raised questions about the nature of realism, about Degas's relation to both tradition and modernism, about his attitudes as a nineteenth-century upper-class Parisian, and far more.

The exhibition began with the Clark's own cast of the sculpture—draggled tarlatan skirt, limp hair ribbon, and all—displayed, as usual, on a pedestal as an icon of youthful awkwardness and charm. Next, images of the classroom and rehearsals introduced the world of the *petits rats* of the Paris Opera Ballet, the world to which the model for the *Little Dancer* belonged—she was Marie van Goethem, a young Belgian-born dancer at the Palais Garnier whose family lived not far from Degas's studio. The selection included the Philadelphia Museum's moody *Ballet Class* (c. 1880–81), a picture that seems to flee your gaze with its empty center, bored chaperon, and dancers pushed to the periphery and turned away from the viewer. Outstanding, too, was the near-monochrome *Dance Rehearsal* (c. 1875–76, private collection, courtesy of the Phillips Collection), a little masterpiece of grays and creams, its dim space punctuated by the back-lit shapes of dancers moving among warm brown columns and tall, narrow, arched windows. And it was hard to beat a rapid drawing of a very young student executing a nicely turned-out kick, the motion of her leg suggested, perhaps inadvertently, by sketchy indications of other positions. (Degas, in an effort to educate himself, inscribed the name of the movement, "battement à la seconde à la barre," in the corner of the sheet; a decade later, he still found it helpful to remind himself, on a drawing of an older dancer, "revoir les pieds.")

After the classroom, performance: a gallery dedicated to behind-the-scenes chaos, oblique views of the stage, glimpses of dancers (and sometimes their admirers) waiting in the wings or leaving the stage. The Clark's own pictures, many acquired by

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Sterling Clark from the sales of the contents of Degas's studio after his death, more than held their own here. Most notable, perhaps, was a dazzling pastel view from the wings with two dancers exiting the stage and all but blocking the spectacle behind them, the whole knitted together with abrupt strokes of salmon, yellow, and pink, and spatters of red. A roughly wiped monotype of two airborne dancers and a kneeling companion ran a close second.

The heart of the show was a spectacular gathering of drawings and sculptures related to *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* that led, in turn, to an anteroom where the Baltimore Museum of Art's cast of the sculpture occupied an elegant vitrine to evoke Degas's original installation. Wall-mounted quotes from commentators on the 1881 exhibition reminded you of how variously the *Little Dancer* has been received. The accumulated evidence transformed her from a benignly anecdotal image into a complicated, transgressive object with a troubling set of associations.

Degas's preparations for the *Little Dancer* ranged from an eloquent nude sculpture, more attenuated and rangier than the larger, slightly later, clothed and bewigged version, to a truly dazzling series of drawings of Marie van Goethem both nude and clothed. The clothed drawings, which document Degas's circling his model as he scrutinized her, have been considered by some scholars to be after-the-fact extrapolations from the sculpture, but Kendall makes a convincing case for their being part of the work's evolution—Degas's exploration of three-dimensions in his habitual two-dimensional language. Used to recognizing and isolating eloquent, expressive profiles from the untidy flux of the world around him, he was less accustomed to modelling in the round, so recording the model from all sides—as a series of profiles—could have been a way of translating perceptions appropriate to drawing and painting into sculptural terms.

At the Clark, the sequence of a ravishing sheet of nude studies—a series of detailed records of feet, arms, and heads—and sheets of clothed studies (one rarely exhibited) made perfect sense as a series of exploratory drawings. Degas is testing possibilities. The final pose has yet to be determined, apart from the legs' relaxed version of fourth position. In the drawings, the model links her arms behind her, resting them comfortably against her back as she gazes straight ahead or slightly upward. The sculpture's extreme tipping of the head and the exaggerated backward pull of the arms seem to have come later. Perhaps they were a way of heightening the tension of an essentially static, self-contained figure, a way of making his symmetrical single dancer more active spatially—something that had never been a problem on canvas or paper where there were no vexing questions of how you supported a moving figure against the expanse of the field.

The exhibition concluded with a coda—a selection of Degas's subsequent images of isolated standing dancers—that probed the relation of the *Little Dancer* to the artist's later sculptures. Only tenuously about the ballet, these powerful works show Degas grappling with the female figure in motion with confidence and daring, in more fully sculptural terms than is evident in his rather static earlier effort. The later sculptures are unequivocally about the trajectory of a body in space, apparently unfettered by the traditional demands of logical transference of weight that constrained the academically trained sculptors of Degas's generation. Often he seems to have begun with an unsupported torso and then freely extended limbs outward from this dynamic center. Obviously, you must take into account the difference between small, rapidly executed, apparently private explorations and a relatively large, carefully prepared sculpture designed to make an impact in an important public exhibition, but even so, the effect of seeing these works in proximity was to establish that *Little Dancer* had descendants. Despite her evident oddness, it became plain that far from being an aberration, the *Little Dancer* was part of Degas's long fas-

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cination with the single, potentially mobile female figure, both clothed and unclothed.

The issue of clothing and the question of sculptural development in space brings me to the issue of what Kendall has been known to refer to as "the damned tutu." Briefly, no one knows precisely what the skirt or the ribbon that Degas added to his original wax sculpture looked like. As evidence, there are (slightly contradictory) contemporary descriptions and a rather ratty tutu—possibly not the original—preserved in Degas's studio after his death. Since the wax sculpture was made between 1878 and 1881, and Degas lived until 1917, this unprepossessing piece of cloth could have borne witness to anything up to four decades of grime and other ravages, yet it appears to have been the model for the dingy mini-skirts that are standard equipment for the bronze casts of the *Little Dancer* displayed everywhere.

Kendall, on the strength of the preparatory drawings for the sculpture in his show, plus Degas's (and other nineteenth-century artists' and illustrators') representations of dancers on stage and in the classroom, plus evidence from the history of dance, has quite reasonably pointed out that limp, tattered beige mini-skirts appear nowhere but on casts of *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. It is known, for example, that tutus were always white and that a girl entering the school of the Paris Opera Ballet was provided with five meters of "*mousseline*," presumably to make her official skirt. (The practice is persistent. My first ballet teacher, a former partner of Pavlova's, required his students to wear tunics apparently descended intact from pre-revolutionary Russia; we had to provide the material, but the sewing instructions were based on a given length of fabric.) To test his hunch, Kendall worked with a dance costumer to produce a skirt that more closely approximates tutus in other images and descriptions. The result? A fuller, longer skirt that not only looks more like the ones in Degas's drawings and paintings, but because of its volume makes the sculpture more aggressive about its demands for space—in short, more sculptural. The "new" white tutu, however, contrasts rather abruptly with the dark patination of the bronze and even with the yellowish bodice, which is a problem, especially since what Degas himself did with color and with real materials in his original wax sculpture—extensively discussed in the exhibition catalogue—remains informed speculation. The jury is still out on the new tutu, but the general word is that while it still needs work, it's an idea worth pursuing.

The tutu issue is a very minor part of "Degas and the Little Dancer." What is far more important is the question of Degas and images of bodies in motion, an absorbing idea that underlies not only Kendall's show, but the immensely popular "Degas at the Races" seen this summer at the National Gallery—the first museum exhibition ever devoted to this aspect of the artist's work.[2] The parallels are obvious. Both horse races and ballet performances were great public spectacles, formerly the exclusive province of the aristocracy, but in Degas's day available as amusements for the growing middle classes. (The rise of enthusiasm in France for horse racing coincides neatly with Degas's lifetime; the racetrack at Chantilly, in fact, opened in 1834, the year he was born.) Both horse racing and the ballet depended upon highly trained, athletic creatures capable of remarkable physical feats. Both appeared effortless, but required enormous work in preparation. Both were about speed and the transitory. And both provoked some of Degas's most powerful paintings, drawings, and sculptures. (It's worth noting, perhaps because of what it suggests about nineteenth-century French ballet standards as well as about Degas, that

2 "Degas at the Races" opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, on April 12, 1998, and closed on July 12. A catalogue of the exhibition, by Jean Sutherland Boggs, has been published by the National Gallery of Art and Yale University Press (288 pages, $50).

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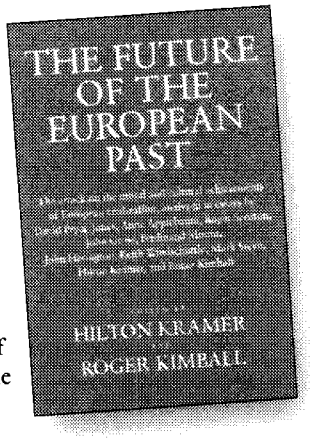

Edited by HILTON KRAMER *and* ROGER KIMBALL

In essays first published in *The New Criterion,* ten distinguished critics analyze the attack on the moral and cultural achievements of European civilization. From the decline of historical memory to the sway of pop culture to the pervasiveness of deconstruction and structuralism in academic inquiry, these trenchant reflections—marked by wit, independence, and commanding intelligence—define the struggle and assess the fate of our cultural legacy. The contributors include David Pryce-Jones, Anne Applebaum, Roger Scruton, John Gross, Ferdinand Mount, John Herington, Keith Windschuttle, Mark Steyn, Hilton Kramer, and Roger Kimball.

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while his elegant thoroughbreds have legs and ankles as slender and finely muscled as any Balanchine dancer's, his ballerinas are distinctly zaftig.)

Unlike the Clark's tightly focused exhibition, "Degas at the Races" spanned half a century of the artist's work—from about 1855 to 1904. It began with the painter's youthful studies of horses, made not from life, but from works of art, including plaster casts of the Parthenon frieze, Paolo Uccello's *Battle of San Romano*, and Benozzo Gozzoli's enchanting *Journey of the Magi*. Horses appear in some of Degas's early narrative paintings, but they clearly interested him less than the figure. This distancing is not surprising since, according to the informative main catalogue essay by the eminent Degas scholar Jean Sutherland Boggs, neither horses nor riding as a leisure activity played any significant role in the painter's life. Although anyone alive when he was would have seen carthorses, carriage horses, and even elegant thoroughbreds constantly, Degas seems to have experienced horses as he did dancers—as a spectator, not a participant—further filtering his perceptions, at least at first, through the art he admired.

The exhibition traced Degas's evolution as a maker of horse images beginning with rather conventional race track scenes from the 1860s that are clearly indebted to popular sporting prints of the period with an admixture of Géricault—who also seems to have had one eye on English precedents, despite his initial training with a Parisian specialist in horse paintings. Degas being Degas, of course, there are abundant pleasures in even the most unexceptional of these early works—his seductive, incisive drawing, his exploitation of the jockey's silks to provide exotic orchestrations of color, his choice of original perspectives—but as a group, the pictures lack the unexpectedness that characterizes the painter at his best. As the exhibition unfolded, however, you could watch Degas educating himself about horses and riders—and sometimes spectators—just as he educated himself about the ballet. Later,

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Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of "animal locomotion," published in 1887, played a role in expanding Degas's vocabulary of horse images, but his own rapier eye was primary. He studied mounted jockeys and horses in motion or at rest, filling pages with rapid, fluent notations that are among the most immediate, intimate works in the exhibition.

In his most achieved images of horses and riders, as in his strongest pictures and sculptures of dancers, Degas gravitated toward casual, disorderly moments—dancers in class or rehearsal or leaving the stage, jockeys milling about on their mounts. He viewed even "organized" events—the performance or the race—from angles that make them unpredictable and irregular. With dancers and horses alike, he was most attracted not to immediately recognizable, achieved poses, but to seemingly insignificant transitional positions of limbs and bodies, positions that implied both past and future states, and so potently evoked a sense of movement.

Nowhere was this more evident in "Degas at the Races" than in a superb group of sculptures that included sixteen rarely exhibited waxes from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. (Some were shown beside their incarnations in bronze, and, in the section of the show devoted to technical aspects of the posthumous casting, a wax was exhibited with both the bronze *modèle*—the first bronze, used as a master for the edition—and one of the casts made from the *modèle*; the trio revealed fascinating original details and evidence of Degas's urgent touch, preserved in the *modèle*, but now lost in the wax.) Some of these vivid, vigorously modelled creatures are based directly on Muybridge photographs, so they could be seen simply as aids to Degas's effort to understand equine anatomy. But they are astonishing in sculptural terms. Like his late sculptures of dancers and bathers, Degas's most daring horse sculptures start and twist, defying gravity—and the canons of academic *animalier* sculpture—to become nearly abstract embodiments of power and energy.

Many of Degas's pastels of racetrack motifs from the 1890s have a good deal in common with his pastels of dancers from the same years. In both, he traced and repeated configurations, subtly adjusting the relationships of individual elements to each other and to the whole, and altering the mood and temperature of the result with alterations in his palette. The brilliant silks of the jockeys triggered complex color harmonies in Degas's racetrack pictures, just as the play of stage lights on costumes did in his ballet images. In his investigation of both motifs, he experimented with bold overlaps and asymmetries, dramatic shifts of scale, and audacious cropping in the construction of his compositions.

Yet there are important differences. The late pictures of dancers always evoke an enclosed, artificial space whose qualities of light—often suggested by remarkable clashes of color—seem to have little to do with natural precedents. Degas's late pictures of riders, by contrast, always seem to be set in an infinite outdoor expanse, in light that conjures up potent associations with particular times of day or seasons or weather—which is not to say that they seem naturalistic. The near-abrasive color, the insistent stroking of the pastels, the dislocation of the spectator's point of view, and the ferocious croppings and compressions all conspire to keep you off balance, to make you concentrate Degas's powers of invention—at the same time that you are convinced that he could tackle the most complicated equine position or problematic foreshortening with assurance and authority.

Connoisseurs of horse culture find much to admire in Degas's apparent fidelity to appearances, but to my eye, at least, the most compelling works in the show dealt with quite other issues. Among these: the haunting pastel *Washerwomen and Horses* (c. 1904, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne), a nervous, sketchily drawn composition of

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two women, jammed together but arching in different directions, like dancers in some exaggeratedly formal sarabande; the pair are trapped between two massive horses, revisions of Degas's early studies of the Parthenon frieze, who loom beyond the confines of the sheet, both creating and collapsing the space inhabited by the women. For sheer strangeness, power, and art historical richness, however, the blue ribbon went to a gallery that brought together both of Degas's large, disquieting pictures of a fallen jockey and a runaway horse, along with preparatory drawings, pastel studies, and other related images, to trace the complicated history of the artist's repetitions of the theme. Degas painted the first, more complex version of the motif (Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon) in 1866, exhibited it to a derisive reception, and then reworked it extensively in 1880–1881 and still again about 1897; eventually, he arrived at a ghostly, crowded image whose threatening mood is arrestingly at odds with its glorious chords of rose, sorrel, and red. A second version (c. 1896–1898, Basel Kunstmuseum), pared down to the fallen rider and a single horse with an ominous shadow, is even more otherworldly; with its spare composition and floating figures, its murky palette and roiling sky, it is as economical and unsettling as an Albert Pinkham Ryder. (No, that is not a pun.)

If you missed "Degas and the Little Dancer" in Omaha and Williamstown, you can see it at the Baltimore Museum of Art this fall. "Degas at the Races," alas, did not travel. Fortunately, both exhibitions are accompanied by excellent catalogues with absorbing, enlightening essays by Kendall, Boggs, and a variety of scholars. The color reproductions, for once, are not bad at all, although the organization of *Degas at the Races* is maddening. The sequence of illustrations makes sense if you are reading the text, but try to find a particular image at your peril. Still, that's a quibble. Both catalogues are fine additions to the steadily growing Degas shelf.

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On a modest scale

by Mario Naves

The retrospective of paintings by Pierre Bonnard at the Museum of Modern Art is an event of such magnitude that it is nearly pointless to discuss other exhibitions concurrently on view in New York. An exaggeration? Yes, but just a bit. "Pierre Bonnard" not only confirms Bonnard's eminence, but it also amplifies it in a way that changes the shape of art in this century. (Did someone at the *Times* say that he was the equal of Picasso and Matisse? If so, they weren't kidding.) There are, of course, other shows around the city, and if none of the four discussed below offers delights on a scale with those of the French master, they do have their pleasures—and, in one case, annoyances. Three of the exhibitions seek to expand our view of art history and end up affirming the legitimacy of the established view. The fourth—"Aleksandr Rodchenko," also at MOMA—presents a no-nonsense genius in a manner that elucidates our understanding of the modernist epoch. Few artists approach the sublimity that we see in the final galleries of "Pierre Bonnard." But to deny those who achieve something authentic, if on a more modest scale, is to miss out on a richness that is part of art's lifeblood.

"Judith Rothschild: An Artist's Search"—at the Metropolitan Museum of Art until September 6—consists of only thirty-one paintings, but it isn't skimpy. It's the kind of prudently gauged retrospective we should wish upon those artists who may not be masters, but are, in the end, worthy of our consideration. Judith Rothschild (1921–1993) was certainly that, a painter with a good eye and a genuine gift. A student of Hans Hofmann and, informally, Karl Knaths, Rothschild maintained a restless curiosity in her work. The exhibition documents her struggle between, as a wall label has it, "the cool rationality of nonobjective painting and a warmer, more 'humanistic' kind of abstraction." Mondrian, who epitomized the former for Rothschild, was an artist about whom she often expressed ambivalence—in 1949 she wrote that his was a "case of the Emperor's new clothes." Yet the Dutch master's influence is unmistakable in the first painting we see upon entering the exhibit, the terrific *Grey Tangent* (1945). Rothschild mutates Mondrian's grid into a disarming arrangement of loops and squiggles. Melding de Stijl purity with a cartoon Cubism, *Grey Tangent* is startlingly fresh, a minor masterpiece of mid-century abstraction.

The paintings that follow *Grey Tangent* are nowhere near as assured. As we follow her artistic evolution, we see Rothschild see-sawing between conflicting currents and puzzling through them. The depth of her pursuit is obvious, and, if the resulting paintings are often half-baked, they are never half-hearted. Rothschild's mature work came in the early Seventies, when she began making relief collages. Cut and parceled shapes, at once figures and flora, are

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juxtaposed against broad areas of color. The chief material used in the collages is foamcore, a strange choice given the nature of Rothschild's imagery; foamcore's stiffness runs contrary to the sinuousness (and sensuality) of her forms. As relief sculpture, the collages are curiously unformed as well. Too often, Rothschild's cut-outs rest on, rather than engage, their support. The works are commendable, but unrealized—they're about, oh, 75 percent of the way there. We leave them thinking more of their antecedents—Matisse and Arp, in particular—than of the artist herself. Still, a few works from the Gothic Series of the early Nineties are smoldering and luxuriant; they make for a dandy, decorative finale. I can't imagine any serious student of art not being interested, and even moved, by Rothschild's search.

The painter Norman Lewis (1909–1979) was a colleague of The New York School painters and, like many of his contemporaries, politically active in a variety of causes. The exhibition "Norman Lewis: Black Paintings 1946–1977"—on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem until September 20—focuses, as the title suggests, on one aspect of his work. For Lewis the challenge inherent in black was "using it in such a way as to arouse other colors." While curators Ann Eden Gibson and Jorge Daniel Veneciano consider his paintings in formal terms, they are just as inclined to relate the color of the canvases to the color of the artist's skin, a tack antithetical to Lewis's art. Lewis was adamant that his paintings be "inherently aesthetic," that their "excellence . . . be the most effective blow against stereotype." The curators, however, have few qualms about reinstating such stereotypes. Indeed, Gibson writes that Lewis suffered from "conscious repression" in refuting political undercurrents in the paintings. Admittedly, a title like *Klu Klux* suggests just such an undercurrent, and it is not unreasonable to assume that Lewis's commitment to civil rights should, to an extent anyway, inform his vision as an artist. But to cast him as a political—or, as the catalogue has it, a "post-colonial"—artist is to ignore the art and demean the artist. There's a difference between a political artist and an artist who is politically engaged outside of the studio. This is a distinction many artists live with every day, and it's one the curators can't fathom without resorting to armchair psychology.

Lewis's strongest work dates from the late Forties and early Fifties, not coincidentally the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. The heady climate of the era undoubtedly inspired Lewis as a painter, as did the comradeship and competition provided by friends like Ad Reinhardt. The work is typical of the time: equal parts automatism, primitivism, Kandinsky, Klee, and the requisite Cubist underpinnings. Certainly, it is the only time in Lewis's work where the color black has any presence as such. In paintings like *Orpheus* (1953) and *Every Atom Glows: Electrons in Luminous Vibration* (1951), Lewis imbues scumbled areas of black with a hazy, otherworldly glow. Biomorphic forms, recalling calligraphy or vegetation, slip in and out of a liquid space that is ominous and distinctly Surrealist. The paintings are handsome, if not first-rate—they're rarely as strong as they want to be. (The Studio Museum inadvertently accentuates the point by placing, in an introductory gallery, a Lewis canvas between a prime de Kooning and a stronger-than-usual Pollock.) Lewis's paintings are an honorable addendum to the legacy of the New York School. They are unlikely, however, to overturn anyone's idea of the Ab-Ex canon.

Has there ever been an exhibition of art with as immense a chip on its shoulder as "Unknown Terrain: The Landscapes of Andrew Wyeth" at the Whitney Museum of American Art this past summer? The catalogue begins with a litany of critical complaints against Wyeth's art, complaints which the curators naturally seek to refute. Wyeth doesn't need the help, really. He's an immensely popular artist, so much so, in fact, that the *Times* sardonically tagged his

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devotees a "cult." Seen piecemeal, Wyeth's evocations of the American landscape aren't without interest. His oblique perspectives, spatial distortions, and abruptly cropped compositions are smart and effective. I found myself taken with the almost familial dynamism that occurs between a boulder and a tree in *Far from Needham* (1966). But Wyeth brings no joy to the act of painting. Instead, his meticulous (and vaunted) technique makes it seem a chore. Is it this laboriousness which his admirers prize as being quintessentially American? Let's hope there is more to our national image than such bouts of dreary nostalgia. In Wyeth's hands, the art of painting is indistinguishable from taxidermy.

The "unknown terrain" of the title refers primarily to Wyeth's watercolors, which haven't been widely exhibited and which comprise the majority of pieces at the Whitney. Unlike the each-and-every-blade-of-grass particularity of his tempera paintings, the watercolors are characterized by washy areas of brushwork, drips, splashes, spatters, and even the stray footprint. In the catalogue, the curators Adam D. Weinberg and Beth Venn aren't averse to likening Wyeth's watercolors to those of John Marin, Charles Burchfeld, and the New York School or to categorizing some as "expressionist realism." What bunk! Wyeth's watercolors are sheer professionalism. He transforms the intuitive gift of Winslow Homer into a glib approximation of mastery. That Wyeth is self-consciously arty can be gleaned from *Untitled (Tenant Farmer Study)* (1961). About three-quarters of the way up the paper, in what appears to be ball-point pen, is a line and the words "frame on this line." Now, this piece is in the collection of the artist and his wife. So why wasn't the damned thing framed on that line? It's a bit of willed showmanship. This isn't painting; it's pandering. In his own dour way, Andrew Wyeth is as slick and off-putting as Jeff Koons.

Gallery-goers who've become inured to the specialization of contemporary art are likely to find themselves bewildered by "Aleksandr Rodchenko," on view at MOMA until October 6—the first U.S. retrospective of the pioneering Russian modernist (1891–1956). The exhibition documents Rodchenko's impressive achievements in painting, printmaking, sculpture, collage, furniture design, graphic design, and photography. What is exhilarating about the exhibition is not just Rodchenko's proficiency in leapfrogging from medium to medium, but his intensity and drive. In 1916, only a year after arriving in Moscow from the province of Kazan, the ambitious young artist staked his claim as a pivotal member of the Russian avant-garde. Six years later, with the monochromatic canvases *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Blue Color*, and *Pure Yellow Color* (all 1921), Rodchenko announced that he had "reduced painting to its logical conclusion. . . . it's all over." He subsequently put his talents in service of the Revolution, and Rodchenko's edgy futurism is palpable. It's also dated—one might add, cruelly so. "Rodchenko" is, ultimately, less an exhibition of art than a compendium of artifacts. This isn't, however, a malediction. The show is a valuable contribution to our understanding of one of the most curious chapters in the history of twentieth-century art.

Rodchenko was a brilliant, if clinical, artist—a mechanic of aesthetics. Influenced by Malevich and Tatlin, Rodchenko created an art of impersonality and absolutes. Yet if the work is short on soul, it is always impeccably conceived. His taut abstractions, punchy graphics, and feeble Dadaist collages (what is Dada without vitriol?) make plain the engineered aspect of his art. Some of Rodchenko's work in the applied arts—his jittery, rhythmic kiosk studies, for example, or the suprematist buffoonery of his bookmarks—divulge a terse sense of humor. The only time the work comes alive as art, however, is with the artist's photographs. With their zooming diagonals and bird's-eye-views, the photographs are impossibly energized; they demand our attention. The photos share the formal severity of the paintings, but without their rarefied as-

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ceticism. They have the scope we expect from great art. Perhaps Rodchenko's contact with the world of observed events, as opposed to that of utopian ideals, grounded and inspired him. Or, perhaps, two negatives—mechanical medium and mechanical visionary—made for a positive. Whatever the case, Rodchenko's photographs are exhilarating. They capture the rush of early modernism in a way that is still heart-stopping.

The paradox of Rodchenko's photographs is that they were no less committed to the revolution than the rest of his work; often times it was outright propaganda. Even so, his work met with increasing disapproval as "bourgeois formalism," and Rodchenko eventually found himself shunted to the sidelines of the Communist experiment. The exhibition ends in 1936, omitting the clown paintings which occupied the artist in his later years. Such an ending would have been historically correct—the quashing effects of the Communist regime on the avant-garde is a story that necessitates repeated tellings—but the curators probably figured that it was better to end with a bang than with a whimper. As it is, "Rodchenko" concludes with two unforgettable photographs of the circus that have a melancholy that recalls the trajectory of the artist's career. If his considerable achievement is cast in the shadows by that of Pierre Bonnard, well, that's where the rest of us reside as well.

Exhibition notes

"Alberto Giacometti"
at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.
April 18–October 18, 1998

Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) was an artist often held captive by his enthusiasts. In Paris in the late 1920s, after creating totemic Cubist fantasies like *The Couple* (1926) and *Spoon Woman* (1926–1927), the Swiss-born artist was taken up by André Breton and the Surrealists. Some of Giacometti's works from those years—*Reclining Woman Who Dreams* (1929), *Suspended Ball* (1930), *No More Play* (1932), *Le Vide-Poche* (1930), *The Palace at 4* A.M. (1932)—instantly established themselves as Surrealist icons. Looking back on them today, however, what seems most striking about them is their plastic expressiveness. Surrealism proposed to unlock the unconscious by exploding the rational. But these works strike the viewer as eminently conscious and deliberative. They are not accidents. They are works of art.

Giacometti's filiation with the Surrealists came to a noisy end when, following the lead of his art rather than Breton's ideology, he returned to sculpting human heads from a live model. Breton publicly confronted Giacometti with his apostasy from Surrealist orthodoxy; for his part, Giacometti dismissed his commitment to surrealism as a mere "transitional exercise" and a form of "masturbation."

Giacometti's break with the Surrealists pushed him back into obscurity. He re-emerged in the 1940s, this time as a hero of Existentialism, thanks largely to Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote an essay called "The Search for the Absolute" when Giacometti exhibited his work at Pierre Matisse's gallery in New York in 1948. All at once Giacometti's extraordinary elongated sculptures—the walking men, the women standing at hieratic attention: doubtless his best-known works—were hailed as symbols of Man's Lonely Confrontation with the Abyss, etc.

Well, perhaps they are. But they are also unforgettable sculptures, moving in ways unconnected with expostulations about Being and Nothingness, the "upsurge of freedom," and so on. It might be said that, when it comes to art, hell is other people's theories. As Giacometti's biographer James Lord put it, "Seeing, not believing, is what he cared about."

The excellent sampling of Giacometti's art—seventy-odd sculptures, thirty-odd paintings, and sixty drawings—at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts should help corroborate Giacometti's independence from

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the theory-mongers. True, Jean-Louis Prat, Director of the Fondation Maeght (which owns sixty-five works by Giacometti) and Guest Curator of the exhibition, declares that "more than any other artist, [Giacometti] expresses the precariousness of our existence and of the times in which we live." Giacometti did not exactly discourage this sort of talk. And there was much about his biography that provided fodder for gloomy existential rumination. But as one moves through this thoughtfully chosen and well-installed exhibition (the elegant galleries designed by Moshe Safdie are perfect for Giacometti), what really seem precarious are such portentous statements about Giacometti's art expressing the precariousness of existence. This exhibition reveals the distinctively *aesthetic* logic of Giacometti's art, its development out of Cubism and post-Impressionism, its striving to explore certain distinct modes of artistic expression.

Given the abstract nature of much of Giacometti's art, it may seem curious that "likeness" was one of his artistic bywords. He often said that his main ambition was to "copy" what he saw, "to give the nearest possible sensation to that felt at the sight of the subject." He was not being paradoxical. This exhibition shows how the elusive—indeed, the impossible—goal of "likeness" fueled an artistic career of astonishing pathos. Giacometti frequently complained that the more he worked on a picture or sculpture, the more difficult it was to finish it. Evidence of that difficulty is patent throughout Giacometti's art. He set himself the impossible task of fixing in visible form the evanescent heart of the moment. What is extraordinary is how often his pictures and sculptures, heavy with the marks of their making, distill the hard light of naked reality.

"Alberto Giacometti" will not travel. A catalogue for the exhibition, with an essay by Jean-Louis Prat, has been published by The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (128 pages, CAN. $34.95).

—*Roger Kimball*

"George Segal, a Retrospective: Sculptures, Paintings, Drawings" at the Jewish Museum, New York. June 14–October 4, 1998

The American sculptor George Segal (born 1924) made his professional debut with an exhibition of paintings, drawings, and pastels at the Hansa Gallery, an artists' cooperative, in New York in 1956. This was, of course, the heyday of the New York School, and like a good many other members of its so-called "second generation," Segal responded to the movement's Abstract Expressionist aesthetic with a mixture of admiration and ambivalence. He was drawn to its scale, energy, and ambition, yet he found its concentration on abstraction an uncongenial limitation. Preferring representation to abstraction meant, for a number of painters of Segal's generation, taking Willem de Kooning's "Women" paintings as a point of departure in the search for a style of their own, and so it was to some extent for Segal, too. Yet, it was not as a painter that he was ever able to create a body of work that satisfied his own artistic ambitions.

Abandoning painting as his primary medium in the early Sixties—reportedly under the influence of Allan Kaprow, another Hansa Gallery artist whose "happenings" marked a similar rejection of painting in favor of three-dimensional display—Segal turned to a mode of representational sculpture based on the casting of white plaster figures directly from live models. The resulting figures are, in effect, generic Expressionist sculptures defined by their "frozen" gestures and postures—featureless, immobilized archetypes that are made to represent easily recognized emotions, which range from the most banal and benign to the uttermost extremes of melancholy and suffering, but which remain devoid of complexity or depth.

By placing these anonymous plaster effigies in "real" environments, which are constructed from hardware salvaged from the remains of a butcher shop, for example, or a movie marquee or bedroom furniture,

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Segal thus created a series of tableaux that are more like a form of theatrical still life than anything we normally associate with the art of sculpture. Yet, this is the mode of sculpture that has won the artist a large international reputation as one of the leading sculptors of his generation.

It is inevitably the selection of still-life tableaux of generic plaster figures in "real" environments that dominates the current retrospective exhibition, which was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal and has already been seen at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. For its New York venue, the Jewish Museum, the selection of paintings has been somewhat abridged, but that is not, in my view, an intolerable loss. Even the most ambitious of the paintings here—a female nude called *Red Courbet* (1959)—leaves one with few regrets that Segal abandoned the medium.

It is, in any case, for its survey of sculptural tableaux that the public now takes an interest in Segal's work. These have undergone certain changes over the years, with political and Biblical themes having supplanted the earlier emphasis on commonplace subjects from everyday urban life. It was the latter, of course, that made Segal seem to be part of the Pop Art movement in the Sixties—an association that did much to advance his reputation when Pop Art was the rage—but with the passage of time his connections with the Pop aesthetic have been shown to be peripheral. His interests remained those of a social expressionist, and in the more explicitly political tableaux of recent years—particularly *The Holocaust* (1982) and *Depression Bread Line* (1991)—he seems now to have more affinities with the socially engaged art of the 1930s than with anything having to do with contemporary sensibility. They are governed by a similar kind of political sentimentality and melodrama. Certain subjects remain entirely beyond the range of Segal's own sensibility, however. Of these, the most egregious are the painted sculptures about painting. The most awful is the *Cézanne Still Life No. 4* (1981), but almost as demeaning to their subjects are the parodies of Braque and Picasso.

The great suprise in this retrospective comes in the very last room, where the visitor encounters a series of oversized portrait drawings, executed in charcoal and pastels and all dating from the 1990s. The subjects are drawn from family and friends—the artist's wife and mother, the photographer Arnold Newman and the sculptor Marisol—and the emotional note they strike is at once somber, respectful, and unflinching. In my judgment, these are the finest works of art George Segal has ever created. They are also the most "traditional" in their command of a dense chiaroscuro that is in many ways more "sculptural" than anything to be found in the artists's sculpture. They are the most personal, too, and they leave one wondering if drawing, rather than sculpture or painting or the attempt to combine them, may not after all be his true métier.

—Hilton Kramer

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Dance

Jerome Robbins, 1918–1998

by Laura Jacobs

When Jerome Robbins died on July 29, 1998, at the age of seventy-nine, the world lost not one choreographer, but two. One of these choreographers was a genius.

This was the Jerome Robbins who choreographed thirteen Broadway shows—legend among them *On the Town*, *The King and I*, *Peter Pan*, *Gypsy*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. This was the Robbins who conceived, directed, and choreographed *West Side Story*, the musical and film phenomenon that had every baby-boomer boy in America attempting that chesty Jets leap, that T (for testosterone) in the air. And this was the Robbins of *Fancy Free*, a ballet whose character—down-to-earth, free of classical pretensions—is captured forever in its title.

In fact, *Fancy Free* was Robbins's birth cry, his *c'est moi*. Though he studied widely—modern dance, ethnic, and ballet in the 1930s—and had worked with the Yiddish Art Theater, it was in this comic ballet about three sailors on leave that he burst upon the scene complete, with a choreographic voice so clear and confident, so cut-to-the-chase concise that you'd never guess it was a first anything. Writing of *Fancy Free*'s 1944 premiere at American Ballet Theatre, the critic Edwin Denby said of the smash hit, "Its sentiment of how people live in this country is completely intelligent and completely realistic." More importantly, "The whole number is as sound as a superb vaudeville turn; in ballet terminology it is perfect American character ballet."

Fancy Free was a masterpiece of sexy-slangy storytelling—John O'Hara meets Jack Cole—and such a concentration of gesture and energy, high hopes and humor, that one year later it was actually opened out into a musical. Robbins and *Fancy Free*'s composer, a young unknown named Leonard Bernstein, along with the librettists Comden and Green, turned it into *On The Town*. Imagine, a Broadway musical born from a twenty-minute ballet!

The inverse was possible too. In 1951, for *The King and I*, Robbins choreographed "The Small House of Uncle Thomas," a dance-pantomime that pinpoints the musical's theme of slavery versus freedom. It is fixed in the musical like an exquisite bird in a golden cage, yet, in memory, it floats free, its own world with its own beating heart. In his heroine's escape—"run-Eliza-run, run from Simon"—Robbins burns that beating heart into the ear and eye. And he does this with a stress of brilliant simplicity: Eliza moves by hopping on one bare foot, the other flexed in Hinduese behind her. It is a childlike hopscotch, a crippled skip of flight—all tightrope-taut within a Siam silhouette of bent limbs and splayed fingers. Here is Robbins's poetic gift in full display: a synthesis that is kinetic and true. For sheer, formal terror on the dance stage, the zigzagging bloodhounds of Simon have it over the evil fairy Carabosse of *Sleeping Beauty*. Well, Robbins understood tyrants. He himself was a mythic monster in the

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studio, driving dancers into the crosshairs of his perfectionism.

Robbins went back and forth between Broadway and ballet (he choreographed a little for ABT, a lot for NYCB, where he became a ballet master in 1969), and his best work reads on any stage. In 1995, when New York City Ballet decided to present Robbins's dances from *West Side Story*—a suite he'd arranged for *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* (1988), a show of Robbins's greatest Broadway hits—there was disdain among the Kremlinologists. George Balanchine, they grumbled, had never seen fit to put these dances on his stage (he objected, I think, to boys in blue jeans). And yet *West Side Story* was the rocket blast of the 1995 season (and each season since), and not just because Robbins had rehearsed it within an inch of its life, or that the dancers brought a hot-blooded, rumbling joy to their roles as Jets, Sharks, and chicks. Robbins worked a stunning opposition into the choreography: absolutely explosive displays of sexual, territorial energy, but trapped within the dynamics of popular dance (mambas, cha-chas, jazz contractions, beatnik shrugs), and so luminously constructed that you saw everything—wide shot, zoom-in, switchblade.

It was thrilling to see those ballet boys in blue jeans, lifting into those huge T's in their fresh T-shirts. The dances weren't arty; they weren't dated. They were vivid with social jitters to which rap kids could relate. "I would guess that in a few decades," wrote the film critic Pauline Kael in a famously scathing review of 1963, "the dances in *West Side Story* will look as much like hilariously limited, dated period pieces as Busby Berkeley's 'Remember the Forgotten Man' number in *Gold Diggers of 1933*." She guessed wrong. This is perfect American character ballet—and its audience is alive.

The other Jerome Robbins was the choreographer who turned his back on Broadway in the late 1960s. This artist was tired of the endless fight and compromise that came with any enterprise involving big-bucks egos. What Robbins wanted was to choreograph in a situation where he had sole control of the dance. A ballet company offered this. He was also, I believe, searching, reaching, for a choreographic voice that had thus far eluded him, a voice that would not be qualified as "character ballet," but was classical.

What Robbins did not possess as a choreographer was apparent in his second ballet, *Interplay* (1945). It had the sort of plotless-plot Robbins would return to again and again—youngish dancers joshing around, playing with classical steps in a communal bubble of vague emotional temperature. Just as Denby declared what was so bold and right about *Fancy Free,* he fingered what Robbins was missing in *Interplay*: "In point of expression he has difficulty in the complete transformation of specific pantomime images into the large and sweeping rhythm and images of direct dancing."

This is a rather abstract distinction, but what Denby means is that Robbins was grafting images onto his ballet, not drawing them out. It was synthetic versus organic. Classical dancing is its own growing language of shape, shadow, and blossoming intonation: a language that does not require synthesis with other dance forms (though it can accommodate other forms), but longs to meet its maker in a mystic commingling of arabesques, metaphors, and sighs. To see this way is a peculiar imaginative gift—the proverbial *baiser de la fée*—and you have it or you don't. Robbins possessed the steps, adopted the classical etiquette, had formal facility to spare, and was superb within the framework of beginning-middle-and-end (*The Cage*; *Afternoon of a Faun*; *The Concert*; *Ives, Songs*). But the secret meanings, the poetic-infinite—this was beyond him. He had not been kissed.

But how he strived to reach that plane. There were the acclaimed, ambitious, "pure" works like *Dances at a Gathering* (1969) and *Goldberg Variations* (1971)—graceful, large-scale "interplays" to Chopin and Bach, ballets in which long length seems to speak for

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their seriousness. They are sleek, yet slow-going, beautifully fluent, but not quite rich or deep. Take *Watermill*, which Robbins choreographed for Edward Villella in 1972. A presage of Robert Wilson, it is another experiment in duration, only this time a Zen time-bend in which Villella hardly moves. Again, no breakthrough.

Robbins's frustrations were never more apparent than in his final collaboration with Leonard Bernstein. Balanchine's great collaborator had been Igor Stravinsky, and, in a smaller, narrower vein, Bernstein was Robbins's. The two were well aware of Balanchine and Stravinsky above them—never more so than in their work on *West Side Story*. While all the talk focused on its being a contemporary version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the musical's aesthetic precedent could be found in Stravinsky. Bernstein detonated his score with the screams and implosions of *Le Sacre du printemps*, and Robbins worked the social spasms of Nijinsky's peasants into his gang dances. *West Side Story* is less a tale of love than a tale of tribes (at first, Maria was not Puerto Rican; she was Jewish).

In 1974, at NYCB, Robbins and Bernstein premiered *Dybbuk*, a ballet based on a classic of the Jewish theater, a magico-religious ghost story. In his book *Thirty Years: The New York City Ballet,* Lincoln Kirstein devotes four pages of psychoanalysis to Robbins's work on *Dybbuk*, focusing on his obsession with abstraction. "The first performance passed well enough," writes Kirstein:

> Soon after, instead of building onto present elements, Robbins commenced cutting. It was as if he were unable to make the work "abstract" enough, as if some dybbuk were pursuing him. I admit I never saw need for abstraction. . . . While the music was drawn powerfully from ethnic material, and dance steps could hardly resist following Bernstein's domineering pulse, there was a constant if almost haphazard effort to strip the action of any shred of literal legibility.

It was compulsive self-sacrifice, Robbins rending his own magical storytelling, his gift, as if in some bargain with the patriarchs, an initiation rite into a mystic circle. *Dybbuk* was finally shelved because Bernstein got fed up with Robbins's changes. And Robbins, probably the wealthiest choreographer who ever lived, a success in so many wonderful ways but not the way he wanted, went on. He made a total of sixty-six ballets.

Robbins was drawn to Bach in his last years. It was not an obvious match, but Robbins seemed at home in this bubble, happy to answer this stern voice of trills and ringlets. Robbins's last ballet, *Brandenburg*, was premiered in 1997 and was again overlong, with the old coyness of *Interplay* reading faux in a choreographer of seventy-eight. Three years earlier, in 1994, Robbins made a showpiece for students at the School of American Ballet. This work, *2 & 3 Part Inventions,* took facility as its subject—Bach's and Robbins's—and treated the students not as kooky kids in daisy chains, but as young artists in search of maturity, testing technique for its poetry. Robbins's desire to the very end, that ceaseless reaching, was a deep bow to the art of ballet.

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The media

Operation retract

by James Bowman

The whole question of "media bias" has always seemed to me to be a remarkably unproductive one. What unbiased observer could doubt that the media is biased? But so are we all. Media bias is a mere truism, and those who waste their time fulminating against it seem to me to do so because they suffer from the delusion that the media ought to be, or even can be, unbiased. This fatal assumption plays into the hands of those who are responsible for the real problem with the media: its dishonesty—about its biases as about other things—and its self-importance. Such people will always and very happily argue for their un-bias with those who say they are biased—thereby demonstrating the largeness and openness of mind that is so often taken by the ignorant to betoken an absence of bias.

As if there were a logical inconsistency between being biased and being fair-minded! The metaphor of "bias" derives from the English game of bowls, in which balls the size of grapefruits (but each weighing about as much as a brick), are rolled across smooth lawns toward each other. The "bias" refers to the tendency of the ball, because of the uneven distribution of its weight, to roll one way rather than another. The object of the game is to compensate for the bias in one's bowling and so to make the ball roll true. There is, so far as I know, no organized movement dedicated to the elimination of bias in bowls.

But the biased as we find them in the contemporary American news media love to keep this conversation with the opponents of "bias" going because, even if they lose a little bit, they still win an acknowledgment from their foes that at worst there has been an accidental and temporary falling off from a mythical standard of perfection—a standard which confers upon the media the moral authority they are so eager to claim. The voice of Dan Rather may not be the voice of God, but it gains considerably in *gravitas* from the fact that both its apologists and detractors seem to expect it to be.

Over the course of the summer, the left-wing organization called FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) published a study which purported to debunk "The Myth of the Liberal Media." Having surveyed 141 journalists and editors in Washington, the study discovered that they were, broadly, "liberal" on social issues—especially abortion and homosexuality—and "conservative" on economic issues, including trade (if you assume, as Pat Buchanan certainly would not, that free trade is a "conservative" cause) and fiscal policy. To FAIR, these findings suggest that journalists are in thrall to their "corporate masters" (oddly, it doesn't seem to have occurred to them to survey the corporate masters), but they might as easily have concluded that they are, like the country in the last two presidential elections, "New Democrats."

Certainly there is no contradiction between these data and a similar poll of a

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couple of years ago, often cited in conservative quarters, that nearly 90 percent of Washington journalists voted for Clinton-Gore. What FAIR can't stand is that the political consensus in the U.S. has so thoroughly rejected left-wing economics while at the same time accepting, sometimes in a milder form, left-wing views on sex and religion.

And, it might be added, the armed forces. For the FAIR survey was used as ammunition by Walter Goodman of *The New York Times* in his quarrel with William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, over what the latter had called "anti-military" bias in the media. Kristol's remark had been inspired by the retraction of a story jointly prepared for CNN and *Time* magazine, where it appeared under the byline of Peter Arnett and April Oliver, which purported to show that American forces in Laos during the Vietnam War had used, in something called Operation Tailwind, the deadly nerve gas Sarin against American "defectors." Goodman the media critic flew to the defense of the media, writing with a familiar posture of evenhandedness that "journalists' claims of objectivity are perhaps imperfectly realized; even so, the hard-line critics protest too much."

I hope I may digress here to deplore the use in America's Newspaper of Record of this lamentably overused Shakespearean tag. Goodman employs it simply to mean that the critics are wrong. We could have gathered as much from the epithet "hard-line" which he has already so thoughtfully supplied to describe them. When was a "hard-line" critic ever right about anything from *The New York Times*'s militantly soft-line point of view? In *Hamlet*, "The lady protests too much, methinks" is an excellent joke against herself in the mouth of Gertrude. The woman who married Claudius "a little month" after the death of Hamlet's father thinks that the Player Queen might have been the tiniest bit less ardent in proclaiming her intention to be true to her husband's memory after death. "Protests" does not mean "objects to" or "expresses disapproval of" but, rather, its opposite, "asserts" or "affirms." But, whether or not there is any doubt about the media's being anti-military perhaps we may agree that it is anti-literate.

Goodman then goes on to quote from a communication he received from Stanley Rothman of the Center for the Study of Social and Political Change at Smith College. Rothman, he says, "agreed that the Kristol crack was 'inappropriate,'" though he is said to have added the proviso that "there is, in fact, a good deal of evidence that television reporters tend to be social and political liberals who have, since the Vietnam War, been quite suspicious of the American military and willing to believe the worst of it."

Exactly how this way of putting it is supposed to be less "inappropriate" than, or even distinct from, Mr. Kristol's, Professor Rothman declines to explain. Walter Goodman, however, means to chide them both, once again striking a familiar attitude by arguing that the system worked, since "a striking aspect of the episode was the failure of the liberal establishment to rally to the defense of the anti-military reporters. As a group, journalists, albeit not known for their sympathies for the Pentagon, came down hard on their own cohort."

Passing over the opportunity for another digression, this one on *The New York Times*'s use of the word "cohort" to mean "colleagues" or "fellow-journalists," I wonder if Goodman's reasoning here can be said to be one of the legacies of the Monica Lewinsky scandal and the standard it has set for partisanship in public discourse. For it now seems that anything short of a shameless defense of the indefensible is apparently evidence of an admirable standard of objectivity and fairness! Not only had CNN and *Time* retracted the "Operation Tailwind" story and fired April Oliver along with her senior producer, Jack Smith, but Ted Turner himself had announced with typical extravagance that "nothing has upset me as much in my whole life" as this mistake, not even

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"losing to the Yankees in the World Series after being up by two games, the failure of two marriages, the death of my father. . . . If committing mass suicide would help, I've even given that some consideration." There may be some doubt as to whether his CNN staff would join him in drinking the Kool-Aid, but you can see how it might appeal to Turner's sense of the theatrical to be the Jim Jones of Atlanta.

Here, at any rate, we really do have someone protesting too much! Yet, he did have a lot to protest about. The Pentagon had issued a scathing report in rebuttal to the story. Also, CNN's own internal investigators—headed by Floyd Abrams; its senior executives (some of them disingenuously); and its Pentagon correspondent, Jamie McIntyre, all agreed that the story was inaccurate. The network's lawyers made a substantial payment to retired Admiral Thomas Moorer, who was an abused source for the story, and offered one (which was rejected in favor of legal action) to retired Colonel Eugene McCarley, the commander of Operation Tailwind. Other lawsuits are pending. Journalists with chutzpah any less formidable than President Clinton's could hardly have failed to acknowledge that there had been an error.

Still, many did not. April Oliver found a ready forum—including Fox News, the op-ed page of *The Washington Post* and, even, CNN itself—to try to argue that the report had been accurate after all and the retraction the product of what her fellow victim, Mr. Smith, called the network's "too bloody cozy" relationship with the Pentagon. I wonder if it would be "inappropriate" to call that an example of an "anti-military" attitude?

But the best thing about the scandal was the spectacle of "Baghdad" Peter Arnett cringing in order to keep his job. The Pulitzer Prize winner and pioneer of the contemporary hero-journalist mythology found himself claiming exculpatory negligence because he had contributed "not a comma" to the report. "I was the host correspondent," he claimed. "I'm primarily an action reporter. I was never informed that my face on the air gave me responsibility for a major story. In the field, I have to answer for everything I say and do. To many, it's shocking that I could be so detached. But this was a team effort. I'm a company guy. You want me to read a script, I'll read it." His superiors, who had unaccountably omitted to inform him of his responsibility, let him off with a reprimand—much to the reported disgust of his colleagues at CNN who would like to have seen some corporate heads roll.

Among those heads was that of Richard Kaplan, chairman of CNN/USA and formerly of ABC News, who was responsible for the latter network's embarrassment over the Food Lion story.[1] The extent of both his and Arnett's responsibility for the story was assumed to be determined, as so many things are determined in the Clintonian Age, not by his position in the corporate hierarchy, but, paradoxically, by the extent of their non-involvement in the actual writing of the report. As neither man seems to have taken any interest in the question of its accuracy or inaccuracy before it aired, neither can be said to bear any responsibility. Arnett admitted to having conducted one interview with questions prepared by Ms. Oliver (others say three interviews), and he insists that his name was added to the byline in *Time* for "marketing reasons."

But it may be a long time before the most memorable of his many disclaimers stops reverberating on the airwaves. "The producers took the tape and I was gone," he said. "I was the face." Small wonder that Arnett's fellow bigfoot at CNN, the comely Christiane Amanpour, was livid at the prospect of a collateral reduction to mere "face"-hood when she wrote on the op-ed page of *The New York Times* that

> I object to the new image of correspondent as nincompoop. I reject the idea that a television

1 See "Lionizing the Networks" in *The New Criterion* (March 1997).

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> correspondent is neither responsible nor accountable for what he or she says on the air. . . . Ninety-nine percent of the television correspondents I know do not do this job—often dangerous, often heartbreaking, often at great personal sacrifice—just to read work prepared for us by others. Correspondents have been imprisoned, wounded, even killed on the job. We do not put ourselves on the line in order to contribute "not one comma." . . . Ninety-nine percent of us understand the power of the medium we work in and the responsibility that entails, and we accept our duty to the public. The I-was-just-reading defense pumps blood to the very heart of the worst prejudices about television news correspondents and the news media in general. . . . In the same way a network correspondent accepts the awards and the praise when the team's work deserves it, a correspondent must accept the consequences when mistakes are made. It's that simple. Ninety-nine percent of the correspondents I know understand it, and 99 percent of my colleagues at CNN want you to know they understand it too.

Alas for Christiane, the mischief seems to have been done, and that mighty heart of prejudice is beating still. Asked by a Fox News poll, "Do you think television newscasters are real reporters or are they more like actors playing reporters?," a clear majority (54 percent) of those who had heard about the Tailwind affair (as opposed to 46 percent of all respondents) answered that "newscasters are just actors playing reporters." It is a small step in the education of the public. In our next lesson, we will answer the question: what are the reporters playing?

Not that the media will not make the most of the opportunities the scandal presents them with. Doreen Carvajal, for instance, another *New York Times* media person, reports that

> The general expansion of prime-time news magazine shows has created new opportunity for producers, but raised some concerns among them that the competitive environment has increased their responsibilities and intensified potential journalistic hazards—from accelerating the careers of less experienced producers to raising the volume of news stories.
>
> "The notion that very many correspondents just come in and read scripts—I think that's most uncommon," said Tom Bettag, the executive producer of ABC's "Nightline." "There are many more dangers now in a much more pressured budget environment where the news divisions are expected to make larger profits."
>
> The expansion of news magazine programs, he said, is making everybody work faster, adding: "there isn't enough talent. Everybody is ratcheting up the speed with which they work and that's totally wrong."

As always, the more goof-ups, the more the media manages to take them as excuses for further self-aggrandizement and bigger budgets. Similarly, ABC took the opportunity afforded by CNN's embarrassment to announce, through its president, David Westin, that it "would pursue 'deep' rather than 'hard' reporting" and that, as Sharon Waxman of *The Washington Post* put it, "ABC had sufficient mechanisms in place to prevent reporting lapses like the one that recently left CNN and *Time* magazine reeling." CNN itself announced the creation of a new executive vice-presidency for standards and practices and so made its own claim on kudos for its mistake.

It was enough to make even Cokie Roberts observe that "this plays into the whole conservative view of the liberal media, which is that it's a fundamental view of America that is essentially anti-American. It is saying that the American military is such an evil institution that it will go out and do this to its own people." Where could such an idea have come from, I wonder? Yet the same view of "the American military" is routine and uncontroversial in Hollywood. Only last night, I saw Gary Sinise in Brian De Palma's movie *Snake Eyes* playing a much-decorated naval officer who not only

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assassinates the secretary of defense, but also ruthlessly guns down friends and colleagues who threaten to interfere with his cover-up of the falsification of testing data on a new anti-missile missile.

Military men are always doing things like this in the movies. The branch of the media that gets paid multiple millions of dollars to blow things up for the entertainment of twelve- and thirteen-year-old boys invariably presents the American armed services as corrupt and incompetent, filled with thugs and murderers. Just the latest crop of summer "blockbusters" provides numerous examples—*Godzilla*, *The X-Files*, *Armageddon*, *Small Soldiers*, *Snake Eyes*. Steven Spielberg's smash hit World War II picture, *Saving Private Ryan*, looks at first glance to be a throwback to the days of cinematic military heroism. Spielberg's films have always been based more on other films than on anything else. But in the end we must conclude that these soldiers are every bit as moronic as the ones in *Godzilla* and *Armageddon*, since they have no idea what they are doing in the war—except for saving Private Ryan.

But none of this is enough to impress Walter Goodman, who insists on regarding the anti-military American media as a right-wing chimera, setting up the straw man of belief in a "conspiracy" of bias as its necessary corollary. How reasonable it sounds! He intends, he says, no "defense of television journalism as a model of objectivity, much less comprehensiveness." No, no. We have our faults. "But it is not a model of conspiracy either"—as if those who would speak against the intellectual fashions of our times must be the kinds of nutcases that those same fashions imagine military men to be. Either that or they are simpletons, unaware that "getting a political fix on television journalism is not easy."

It *is* easy. Childishly simple, in fact. Goodman's saying that fixing the media's point of view will "challenge the most sophisticated calculation" is just a bit of mystification designed to keep a hold on the quasi-priestly status that journalists have attempted to claim for themselves in the last forty years or so. Like Peter Arnett, they want to be seen as a kinder, gentler version of the old swashbuckling heroes that used to be in the movies. And, in order to accomplish this end, it helps them to tear down wherever possible the old-fashioned kinds of heroes. Fortunately, it is still not very difficult to tell which have the feet of clay.

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Books

The wily Mr. Shawn

by Brooke Allen

That *The New Yorker* has become a sacred cow for the American mainstream as well as for the cultural elite has just been demonstrated by the top-priority treatment given by the press to Tina Brown's departure from the magazine and S. I. Newhouse's subsequent choice of David Remnick as editor. The changeover was awarded a front-page spread in the *Times* and a Page Six cartoon in the *Post*, among other choice spots; it's hard to imagine any other periodical in this country arousing such curiosity about its behind-the-scenes doings. The whole fuss is nothing, though, compared with an even more seismic event in the magazine's life: its 1985 takeover by Newhouse, and his ousting of longtime editor William Shawn, the man who for many years personified and defined *The New Yorker*.

The avid interest taken in two new chronicles of Shawn's tenure, published a decade after its actual end, testifies to the fact that the aftershocks of the 1985 coup are still being felt. Since these books were written by Lillian Ross and Ved Mehta—two of Shawn's authors and closest colleagues—unwary readers might well pick them up under the impression that they ought to deliver original or insightful views of the magazine and its famously fastidious, widely revered editor. They will be disappointed, however.

Ved Mehta, who came to the magazine as a young writer in 1960 and stayed on until Tina Brown slammed the door on him some thirty years later, has written a chronicle of Shawn's *New Yorker* as he experienced it.[1] Mehta openly idolizes Shawn, for all the right reasons—and for all the wrong ones, too.

"Like editors from an earlier period," Mehta writes of Shawn, "he thought that his job was to educate readers by exposing them to thought-provoking material, irrespective of how many of them would actually read it." This is true, and it was Shawn's great strength. But Mehta is constitutionally incapable of disinterest: he tells his tale obtusely, from the narrow point of view of a needy and selfish author seeking approbation from the editor he has cast as both father-figure and psychoanalyst. In the process, he bestows on that editor unconditional, and frequently irrational, love.

In fact Shawn was a fine editor without being a perfect one, and his detractors were no philistines, although Mehta obviously believes, and wishes, that to be the case. Shawn's finicky and overly discriminating editorial policies annoyed any number of readers, making many who were essentially in step with the magazine, natural *New Yorker* readers as it were, neither entirely surprised nor entirely sorry at his firing. One of the cleverest of Shawn's critics was Tom Wolfe, who memorably attacked the

1 *Remembering Mr. Shawn's "New Yorker": The Invisible Art of Editing*, by Ved Mehta; The Overlook Press, 414 pages, $29.95.

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editor in a 1965 article in the soon-to-be-defunct *Herald Tribune*. Entitled "Tiny Mummies! The True Story of the Ruler of 43rd Street's Land of the Walking Dead!," Wolfe's piece presented the magazine as a morgue and Shawn as its reigning mortician.

Shawn and his writers did not laugh off the attack, for it was recognized that while Wolfe had gone over the top, he had also hit on a certain truth. *The New Yorker*'s articles were indeed too long, too boring, too polite, too genteel. Shawn's ruthlessly thorough editing took the juice out of pieces; even great literature, it was said, would not have survived his nitpicking. (I was once told of an in-office joke at *The New Yorker*, which proposed twenty immortal lines as they might be edited and improved by the magazine: it led off, I remember, with "It was the best of times, and, ironically, it was the worst of times.")

"Notes and Comments" as conceived and executed for many years by the inimitable E. B. White was a marvelous invention, but as White *was* inimitable, why keep trying to duplicate his distinctive voice, bemused and slightly supercilious, for decades after his departure from the magazine, as though his successors were attempting to channel him from beyond the grave? And what about the magazine's quixotic stand against four-letter words? It was one thing during the prudish Harold Ross's day, but as the Shawn era progressed into the Sixties and beyond, the circumlocutions and euphemisms became downright silly: Pauline Kael's rage when Shawn attempted to replace "ass" with "derrière" in her work, or "crap" with the ridiculous "ordure," was more than understandable.

It is worth quoting Mehta at some length on his first meeting with Shawn, during which they discussed the possibility of the young man's doing a piece about his recent return to India:

> After a moment, [Shawn] said, "I don't think that your article sounds like a *New Yorker* piece—although I don't know what that is. But if you write it, and want to send it to me, I would be glad to read it and help you revise it. I would also think of a magazine that might be interested in publishing it."
>
> I felt a little disheartened. In some part of my mind, I had thought that his listening to me with complete attention meant that he would accept the article. I wanted to ask how I could go about writing an article for *The New Yorker*—for him. But I realized that if I did I would come off sounding like a child who was asking his father to do his homework.
>
> Instead, I said, "How long do you think the piece should be?" . . .
>
> "You should not worry about that. You should simply write it to its natural length—whatever that is," he said.
>
> The simplicity of his answer dazzled me. I came away feeling that everything about Mr. Shawn and *The New Yorker*'s offices was magical.

It is easy enough for a third party to read between the lines of this exchange, although Mehta does not. First of all, he doesn't seem to realize, even these many years later, that Shawn's prevarication was simply a polite way of being noncommittal. With later pieces Mehta would be puzzled when Shawn would claim to be interested in a piece but would nevertheless decline to give the writer an expense account or an advance: for example, "He had adroitly ducked my question about expenses. Perhaps he thought that being concerned with money was corrupting to the sanctity of a writing project, and that the matter should be left out until the project was brought to fruition." On the other hand, the reader suspects, maybe he just wasn't very interested in the piece!

Second, Shawn's "You should not worry about that. You should simply write it to its natural length," while no doubt being music to Mehta's ears, typified an editorial policy that resulted in countless pieces of lengthy and undisciplined nonfiction and alienated a great many readers. The work of writers like Kael, and Mehta himself, would have been

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vastly improved if the authors had been held firmly to a maximum word-count. It is certainly possible that each piece has a natural length; but the author is not always the fit person to decide what that length might be. The editor is.

But giving writers their heads was a part of the soothing, sanatoriumlike environment Shawn fostered for his creative staff. Last spring, Charles McGrath, Shawn's onetime deputy and designated successor at the time of his firing, wrote in an amusing article for *The New York Times Book Review* that Shawn's self-effacing persona encouraged writers to project all their hopes and needs upon him. "Not a few," he noted, "compared the process to psychoanalytic transference." *The New Yorker*'s writers have over the decades been a notoriously neurotic lot, with a disproportionate number of alcoholics, schizophrenics, manic- and unipolar depressives, and just plain eccentrics. For his own reasons Shawn took on the role of father, and like greedy children his writers took and took and took: "Of all the scores of writers Bill dealt with over the years," Lillian Ross writes, "including some who were old friends, only [J. D.] Salinger would go out of his way to be helpful to Bill without asking for anything in return."

Mehta sees Shawn as a model of almost saintly self-denial. But Mehta is a shockingly poor interpreter of the people and events he describes. Reading, again, between the lines of Mehta's book, and of the many other accounts that have been written of Shawn's editorship, it is not difficult to discern that while Shawn was no doubt a man of great moral rectitude, personal kindness, and generosity, he was also a control freak of the deepest dye. In his light and timeless memoir *Here at "The New Yorker,"* Brendan Gill wrote that "Shawn's delicacy is a negative brute force that gets greater results than [Harold] Ross's positive one"; Charles McGrath, in the article quoted above, noted that Shawn "had an iron will, and he was not without a subtle appreciation of his own power." The recollections of Jeremy Bernstein, who wrote many essays on scientific subjects during the Shawn administration, were recently published in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* and are of great interest: he gets more real insight about his subject into his three pages than Ved Mehta does in his 414. Especially telling is Bernstein's description of Newhouse and Shawn entering the Rose Room at the Algonquin together, just after Shawn's dismissal.

> I wanted to study their entrance. Mr. Shawn's politeness, which at times verged on aggression, was notorious. You could not get through a door or into an elevator behind him. He would simply stand there until you went first. The entrance to the Rose Room was sufficiently constricted so that one of them had to enter first. . . . When they reached the entrance to the Rose Room, Newhouse put his arm firmly around Mr. Shawn's shoulders and propelled him through first. If you knew what you were watching, everything you needed to know was in that gesture.

It is certainly a good thing for a magazine editor to be detail-oriented, but Shawn carried micromanagement to an extreme that was in the end to spell doom for his own tenure and for the magazine he had recreated in his image. For one thing, he lacked the easy ability of his predecessor, Harold Ross, to delegate; he eventually took so much upon himself that his presence in nearly every step of the editorial process became dangerously essential. As a result of, and growing out of, this inability to delegate came Shawn's fatal inability to settle upon a successor. In his mid-seventies, long past the mandatory retirement age of sixty-five which had been waived in his case, he dithered over first this candidate and then that: by the time he finally found (in McGrath) one whom his staff was willing to accept, it was too late: Shawn's goose was already cooked.

It was perhaps in his obsessive concentration upon editorial matter that Shawn made his greatest blunder. He was so worried about his own successor, the future

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editor, that he entirely neglected to worry about an equally or perhaps even more important successor: that of the publisher, Peter Fleischmann. Fleischmann and his father, Raoul, *The New Yorker*'s founding publisher, had always directed the business end of the magazine in a highly eccentric fashion, letting the editors run the show entirely in their own way. This was not out of carelessness or lack of interest, but the result of a calculated bet on the editors' gifts, and it was a bet that had paid off handsomely.

By the early 1980s, however, Peter Fleischmann was showing signs of running down. His health had been failing for years, and he lacked a capable and interested heir. In retrospect it seems obvious that Fleischmann would simply be compelled, then or very soon, to sell his controlling interest. It would have been something of a miracle if he had sold it to any publisher who would have continued to let the editorial department call each and every shot in the tradition the Fleischmann family had upheld. Why didn't Shawn admit to himself that such a sale must be imminent? He didn't; and when Fleischmann sold to the highest bidder, rather than, for example, to Warren Buffett, who had at one time wished to buy the magazine and would almost certainly have proved a less meddlesome publisher, Shawn was entirely unprepared.

The *New Yorker* staffer who can claim a more intimate knowledge of William Shawn than any other is Lillian Ross, who arrived at the magazine over fifty years ago, hired, along with three other young ladies, because of the dearth of male civilian talent towards the end of the Second World War. Shawn himself—at that time the managing editor—took them on in defiance of his boss's wishes: Harold Ross "took a dim view of working with women, who were—he was quoted to us as saying crossly—'trouble,'" Lillian Ross writes in her recent memoir.[2] Trouble—and how! For as she recounts in this stupefyingly trashy book, she and Shawn would soon embark on a forty-year love affair that infinitely transcended, she claims, any residual joy he derived from his marriage. "He said that his real self was not in his home. He said that his presence in his home was a deception, that he made efforts to be with his children, but that he felt like a failure with them. . . . If I left him, he said, it would change nothing in his home. If I left him, he literally could not live."

Now to me this sounds not like some extraordinary and unconventional declaration of love but like very much the sort of thing that a married man, who intends to stay married, only too often says to his mistress. Whatever his reasons, Shawn, who one would have thought—between Cecille, their three children, and *The New Yorker*, his true wife—already had more than enough on his plate, decided that keeping up with a full-time mistress and a second establishment, including a child (a Norwegian boy adopted by Ms. Ross) was a worthwhile expenditure of energy.

Lillian Ross's Shawn, sadly, is as one-dimensional as Ved Mehta's, although this time the dimension is a different one. Ross's Shawn is not the happy family man described by Mehta (and many others) but a lonely, hungering soul. He is not the avid editor taking a visceral joy in his work as described by Mehta (and again, by many others), but a frustrated poet who sees his job as "the ultimate cell," "a man whose individual, creative gifts were obscured and thwarted by his success. He was a tormented man, a man who had the desires of a poet but the duties of a caretaker, and of a muse, of poetics." "I am there, but not there," he would say about his marriage.

I'm not suggesting that Ross is inventing any of this. It is probably all true. But the fact is that in her very different way she is as obtuse, because as self-absorbed, as Mehta. Shawn was simply too wily a customer for either writer to capture. He could live out one side of his personality—the artist, the

2 *Here But Not Here: A Love Story*, by Lillian Ross; Random House, 240 pages, $25.

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adventurer—with Ross, and he did so. His marriage, and his work, obviously fulfilled different needs, and were compartmentalized accordingly.

"After forty years," gushes Ross, "our love-making had the same passion, the same energies (alarming to me, at first, in our early weeks together), the same tenderness, the same inventiveness, the same humor, the same textures as it had in the beginning." Much of the memoir is in this vein—Ross, like Mehta, could certainly benefit from some of Shawn's editing these days—and in publishing it while Cecille Shawn (aged ninety-two) is still alive is either extremely tasteless or pointedly vindictive, despite Ross's many protestations of sympathy for Cecille, and her claims that she, as the "other woman," never envied the official wife for a moment.

Ross left *The New Yorker* with Shawn; she returned, after his death, to work for Tina Brown, and in her acknowledgements she openly admits that she began her memoir at the behest of a *New Yorker* editor, Katrina Heron, and that she is "indebted to Tina Brown for her unwavering encouragement, her moral support, her creative participation, and, most of all, for her cheerful understanding of love." If the *schlockfest* that follows was truly written with the advice and encouragement of *New Yorker* editors, that fact alone is proof that Brown's *New Yorker* was not what Shawn's was. William Shawn, whatever his faults, would never have let it get by an initial edit.

The philosophy of We

Richard Rorty Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3. Cambridge University Press, 355 pages, $59.95

reviewed by Jenny Teichman

Richard Rorty's new book—the third volume of his philosophical papers—has three sections. Part 1 consists of disquisitions on, or rather against, the idea of objective truth; part 2 discusses moral progress; and part 3, which has the not quite accurate title "The Role of Philosophy in Human Progress," comprises essays about the history of philosophy.

I'll begin with a short description of part 3. In its first essay, Rorty gives a rather interesting account of some possible ways of writing history of philosophy. One might write about a philosopher, say Kant, from what one hopes would be Kant's own point of view, or from the point of view of a later school of thought, or as part of the project of describing the spirit (*Geist*) of the eighteenth century. All these approaches are O.K., says Rorty, but he condemns a fourth way, labelled *doxography*. By doxography he means the system used by weary professors when they convert their ancient lecture notes into books for students. Doxography, he says, de-brains the great philosophers whose work it tries to explain. The second essay is a review of a book about John Locke by Michael Ayers. The third essay links Hegel, Dewey, and Darwin and considers the question of their separate and compound influences on the ideas of today. In the fourth essay, Rorty explains why he loves Habermas and Derrida. They don't exactly agree with one another so he tries to bring about a reconciliation. The last essay in this section (and in the book) is a dithyramb on the charms of Professor Derrida.

Rorty is at his best when writing about the history of philosophy. His work in that area is not always affected by the neo-pragmatism expounded whenever he writes directly on truth, reason, and objectivity. In part 3 of the book under review, the discussion of pragmatism as such is incidental, not central—though occasionally one hears a muted banging of drums. The we-talk so typical of this author (see below) appears now and then, as when he insists (thump, thump, thump) that "we no longer believe in God." Who is this "we"?, one asks. Well plainly it is *he*, Rorty—and come to that it is also me most of the time. At this point,

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however, a list of real, contemporary, living-and-breathing, God-believing philosophers, physicists, biologists, academic lawyers—and even a few professors of theology—appear before the mind's eye. Rorty must be living a pretty hermetic kind of life if he has never heard of these other we's. And what about the teeming Hindu millions of India and Nepal and Sri Lanka? What about the Jews who keep the Sabbath in every country in the world? What about all those Catholics in South America? What about the Irish? What about Islam? Perhaps, for Rorty, these people are not *we*. Perhaps they are only *them*.

Let's now turn to part I, "Truth and Some Philosophers." One of my acquaintances has a bee in the bonnet about Thomas Malthus and the so-called population crisis. The bee is so huge and so dominating that its host believes ethnic cleansing is a legitimate way of coping with "the problem of too many people." One day the aforesaid host (who is seventy-five years old) remarked in slightly boastful tones: "And I've not changed my mind about these matters since I was twenty." In spite of this disheartening piece of news, I still try, occasionally, to dislodge that dominating bee. One should never completely give up hope.

My inflexible friend has not read much philosophy, but would philosophy have made a difference? Does it make people more open to new ideas than they would be otherwise? Do philosophers and philosophy professors find it easy or difficult to change their minds? Well, there are certain famous examples. Plato changed his mind about the theory of forms for reasons expounded in the dialogue *Parmenides*. Kant claimed to have woken from dogmatic slumbers after reading Hume. Frege abandoned a theory when Russell showed him that it contained a paradox. Russell himself adopted, then abandoned, several different philosophical systems. After careful study, McTaggart gave up his belief in Hegelian idealism. In the 1930s, Wittgenstein denounced his own book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. It's also the case that some academics never change their minds. Such cases are only interesting when the explanation has to do with the kind of philosophy they profess. Frege, as mentioned above, abandoned an important conclusion because he saw that it generated paradox, but Richard Rorty (and others) would perhaps ridicule the idea of taking a logical objection so seriously.

Rorty relates that he started life as "a thrusting young analytic philosopher," but he soon converted to a different way of thinking. He calls this way of thinking pragmatism, though a number of authors regard it as a rogue version of that doctrine; Susan Haack, for example, takes this view. Rorty's neo-pragmatism precludes the possibility of further change because it armors him very thoroughly against reasoned criticism. He is armored because he either rejects, or reductively redefines, all the concepts that reasoned criticism relies on. Those concepts include truth and falsehood, proof and fallacy, evidence and guesswork, clarity and ambiguity, coherence and contradiction, validity and non-validity.

One way to understand Rorty's philosophy is to consider the methods he uses in dealing with critics. Part I of *Truth and Progress* contains replies to critics such as Hilary Putnam, John Searle, and Charles Taylor. In his replies, he performs certain very simple but very effective maneuvers. Similar maneuvers appear in his other books and in my view they encapsulate the essence of his works.

Refusing to talk, I: In the early pages, Rorty suggests that there are people with whom one should not bother to discuss anything serious. He does not name or describe them but probably has in mind loners and eccentrics and individuals who by choice or by accident often turn out to be in a minority of one. In my opinion the fat boy, Piggy, in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* is a good example of the type.

Refusing to talk, II: Rorty suggests there are many questions which everyone should refuse to discuss because they are idle. The

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notion of an idle question comes to us first from Hume and then from the logical positivists. For these philosophers, an idle question is one which cannot conceivably be answered. Rorty's concept of idleness is much more variegated. According to him, ontology is idle because it resembles theology, is a waste of time, and is not something that people care about any more. For these redneck reasons, he describes, on page 169, loss of interest in the question, What is human nature?, as "an important intellectual advance." The question as to whether the solar system existed before Kepler discovered its laws is said to be idle because the answer cannot be found, while the idleness of asking, Are giraffes part of reality?, lies in the supposed fact that the answer is *no*. In chapter 9, a repetition of his Oxford Amnesty lecture, he condemns the question as to whether human beings *really* have the rights listed in the Helsinki Declaration as "out-moded," "not worth raising," and "not relevant to moral choice." This is a tactless and disheartening message for Amnesty supporters and at the same time one which suggests that its author thinks *really* having a right would be like *really* having a pair of shoes. Some of his other, allegedly, idle questions are: asking, with Kant, how synthetic a priori judgments are possible; wondering whether literary criticism produces knowledge; and trying to find out whether (American) higher judges make law or merely interpret the Constitution.

Rejecting distinctions: Rorty explicitly or implicitly rejects the distinctions upon which all reasoning relies. Thus, he explicitly rejects the following: objective truth versus consensus, in-itself versus for-us, bad answers versus bad questions, appearance versus reality, scheme versus content, language versus world, intrinsic versus relational, form versus matter, and intellectual discovery versus reaction to peer pressure. Because he collapses intellectual discovery into peer pressure, he has to reject the distinction between reasoning and asserting. When he writes "we pragmatists argue," these words are either followed by restatements of the position being argued *for* or by insults thrown at "the other side."

The word *argument* is ambiguous, of course. In intellectual discussions, it refers to reasoning in its various modes: syllogism, the principles used in mathematical proofs, statements of probability, references to empirical evidence, and lists of illustrative examples. But it can also refer to mere disagreement; thus exchanges of the form "You did"—"I didn't"—"did"—"didn't"—"did"—"didn't" can be called arguments, as can *tu quoque* quarrels along the lines of "you did such and such"—"you did too."

Rortian "arguments" tend to be personalized. A passage from chapter 11 is characteristic: "We pragmatists are often told that we reduce moral disagreement to a mere struggle for power by denying the existence of reason or human nature. . . . We often rejoin that the need for . . . something ahistorical that will ratify one's claims is itself a symptom of power worship. . . ."

Simplification, straw men, and capital letters: Rorty simplifies the theses of his opponents, then mocks his straw men with the jejune device of capitalization. All nonpragmatists are lumped together as (supposedly) holding to a correspondence theory of truth and then labelled Searchers After Reality As It Really Is.

It has been known for a long time that there are serious defects in the correspondence theory, but Rorty does not mention these. Nor does he seem to realize that it is possible to be an objectivist without holding a correspondence theory of truth. The redundancy theories of Frank Ramsey, Dorothy Grover, and C. J. F. Williams are compatible with objectivism.

Reduction: Reductive redefinition is an important part of Rorty's armor because it gets rid of the concepts that participants in serious discussions normally rely on. In this way, he removes his critics' weapons before they can get started. Rorty's redefinitions include: *objective truth = inter-subjective agreement* and *coherent = familiar*.

Rorty's critics point out that in cutting

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the ground from under their feet he cuts it from under his own. If he thinks truth is nothing over and above inter-subjective agreement, then his own neo-pragmatism will cease to be true whenever people disagree about it. If all truth is relative, then neo-pragmatism is only true for the time being. If true means true for the time being there is no sense in Rorty's urging us to aim for a certain kind of future. By the time the desired future—the Rortian liberal utopia—arrives, it will no longer be true that it was a good one to aim for. By insisting that all our theories, including all our ideas about morality, change continually, and independently of reason, Rorty does away with the possibility of giving reasons in favor of his own philosophy and his own value system. Yet, he takes it for granted that his own moral opinions are the right ones.

These topics bring us to part 2, "Moral Progress," which comprises essays on ethical and social questions examined from a more or less historical point of view. As noted above, Rorty can be interesting when he writes about the history of ideas; moreover, he is less liable to trip himself up in that area than in philosophy proper. The reason? Well, a single contradiction can wreck a philosophical theory, but occasional mistakes of fact need not matter very much in a historical discourse. When Rorty says that the proposition "the truth shall make you free" comes to us from neo-Platonism, and even contrasts it with the teachings of Jesus Christ, this egregious error (supposing it is only an error and not a manifestation of secularism) does not wreck the whole essay in which it occurs ("Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality").

Still, some blunders have more destructive effects than others, and the following mistakes seem quite important to me. Rorty castigates traditional philosophy because, he says, it is based on foundationalism. Philosophers in the past, he says, have tried to prove the reality of human rights by seeking foundational premises about the intrinsic nature of mankind. He writes "people like Darwin and Dewey and myself" know that human beings are malleable and therefore have no intrinsic nature. This suggests that chewing-gum, unlike a diamond perhaps, has no intrinsic nature; but as an anti-essentialist Rorty need not, and indeed should not, must not, appeal to special facts about human beings or chewing-gum. If essentialism is false, then nothing at all can have an intrinsic nature. (Anti-essentialism, though, is a kind of superstition. What is so terrible about admitting that human beings are *intrinsically* malleable?)

Rorty's description of philosophers who theorize about human rights is wrong if he means to refer to Hobbes and Locke. Hobbes's natural right is self-defense and he derives it not from the intrinsic nature of man but from the dangerous character of social life without government. His description of the struggle for survival is not unlike Darwin's. Locke defined persons as beings with reason and memory but states that it is men, not persons, who are the bearers of rights. What are men? Locke says little about their intrinsic nature beyond the statement that they are living creatures, an animal species. He writes "there is *nothing more evident* than that creatures of the same species should be equal amongst one another" (my italics). In other words, the proposition about the right to equality is more evident than any supposed foundation. It is itself a foundation.

Everyone is a foundationalist. Everyone has to take some propositions as bedrock. Rorty himself is a foundationalist in that he takes it completely for granted that the universalization of liberalism and democracy and human well-being is not to be questioned. But because he supposes himself to be an anti-foundationalist he cannot openly *say* that his values are self-evident or undeniable. Neo-pragmatism has no room for the idea of the undeniable. Yet although he cannot *say* his moral beliefs are foundational, he nevertheless *treats* them as such. Well, meaning is use, as Wittgenstein almost suggested. Belief is behavior, as old-style pragmatists used to teach.

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In an earlier book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty wrote that reason is "a ladder which ought to be thrown away . . . in order to bring the liberal utopia into being." It seems he now wants to reclaim the label *reasonable*, which he once rejected. How to do it? Easy-peasy: just redefine the word *rational*. Rorty's new definition gives the word three senses. In his first sense, *rational* refers to a Darwinian ability to cope with one's environment. Squids, he says, are rational in this sense, though human beings, especially technologists, are more so. In Rorty's second sense, the word refers to a quality which according to him is nonexistent because regarded as intrinsic. Only outmoded people like Aristotle could believe in such a quality. In his third sense, the word refers to a bunch of virtuous attitudes: tolerance, non-aggression, being against slavery, and being in favor of Dewey and Democracy and Darwin, not to mention liberalism and feminism and anti-racism. No doubt he holds that "people like Dewey and Derrida and myself" are rational in the third sense.

The whole Rortian account of rationality, however, is stipulative, question-begging, self-serving, and tendentious. It has nothing to do with any definition of rationality in any language, in any dictionary, in any country. It should therefore be rejected. Rorty's stance is still best described as a variety of philosophical irrationalism.

The basis of Rorty's philosophical decisions is summed up on page 171 of *Truth and Progress*: "All we philosophers can do when asked for standards or methods of disinterested . . . inquiry is to describe how the people we most admire conduct their inquiries." If that is all "we philosophers" can do there can, of course, be no justification for our admiration. To ask what makes "the people we most admire" worthy of admiration will be forbidden. It will be an idle question.

Readers know who Rorty himself admires because he has a habit of invoking names. When he writes "philosophers like Davidson and Derrida and myself" or "thinkers like Darwin and Dewey and myself," it is fairly clear that these Big D's are in some sense Daddy figures. And the one he most admires is John Dewey. This is appropriate because Dewey was a father of American pragmatism and an author who theorized about education. One of his better-known theories is the notion that an important function of schools, at least in democratic America, is to socialize children, to make them into good citizens. A consequence of that idea, in America and elsewhere, has been the production of over-socialized adults.

What do I mean by over-socialization? The behavior of over-socialized adults resembles the behavior of the boy-gang depicted in *Lord of the Flies*. It resembles the behavior of the "We-Speakers" described by Ayn Rand in one of her short stories (I realize, of course, that Ayn Rand, even in her wildest dreams or nightmares, could never have been admitted to membership of Rorty's pantheon of persons to admire). In Rand's futuristic story, politicians and educators abolish the words *I* and *you*, so that eventually everyone speaks only of *We*. The moral of the tale is that those who can only speak of We suffer from all kinds of weakness and wimpishness. For instance, they cannot accept personal responsibility and they have no concept of truth.

Rorty's writing, especially in the book under review, is full of the first person, both singular and plural. The plural forms are invoked whenever he sets out to defend irrationalism. The expression "my side" is expanded into "we followers of Nietzsche," "we supporters of Davidson," "we pragmatists," "we twentieth century philosophers," "we modern thinkers," and "philosophers like myself and N," where N is maybe Darwin or Dewey or Derrida or some other well-known or well-paid heavyweight. Expressions like these occur over and over again, dozens of times, scores of times.

Neo-pragmatism is a philosophy of consensus for gangs and peer groups. It is the Philosophy of We.

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The irrationalist cast of mind and way of thinking is simultaneously mushy and impervious. One might wonder why authors such as Charles Taylor, Tom Nagel, Susan Haack, and John Searle have seemingly tried to convert its adherents. It would be a great triumph, of course, to dislodge the bee of irrationalism from the bonnet of even one professor, but I do not think that is, or should be, a primary aim. In spite of appearances, Taylor, Nagel, Haack, and Searle are not talking directly to the adherents of irrationalism; they are talking to third parties.

A humble Cyrano

Eric Ormsby, For a Modest God: New and Selected Poems. Grove Press, 139 pages, $20

reviewed by Ben Downing

"Entre deux mots, il faut choisir le moindre," Valéry once counselled. Prodigally, Eric Ormsby has spurned that advice, electing in many instances to use the ten-dollar word where the bargain one might do. *For a Modest God*, his first book published in the U.S. (two earlier, Canadian volumes are sampled in it), rings with an opulence of phrasing too rarely heard in our poetry. Ormsby's deluxe style is sure to offend those who equate polysyllables with pompousness and full-throated melody with atavism. But for the antique rest of us, his poems afford the rare pleasure of listening to a polished yet deeply humane sensibility respond, in language of exhilarating verve, to whatever it seizes on or despairs of.

Take, for instance, this passage from "Gazing at Waves":

> The spectacle is sovereign, yet intimate.
> How soon the waters enter our
> attention, follow us in sleep,
> accompany the cadence of our minds,
> seem punctual and seriatim, curled
> in all the beauty of futility,
> so promptly mortal as they gather in,
> ascend and hover in the gusting air,
> then amble over into hiddenness,
> fold themselves in sand like drowsy claws
> curved into the twilight of the nest.

"Sovereign, yet intimate" characterizes Ormsby's tone here and throughout. Despite their pedigreed diction, his poems never strut, condescend, or lapse into mandarin whims and obliquities. Quite the opposite: Ormsby always tries to shadow, like the waves, "the cadence of our minds." In this case, his parataxis and gently lapping rhythms mimic not only the ocean but the ruminative drift its sounds touch off in us.

Turning to another poem, "Rooster," we find this chirpier bit of parrotry:

> I like the way the rooster lifts his feet,
> so jauntily exact,
> then droops one springy yellow claw aloft
> just like a tailor gathering up a pleat;
> and then there are those small, surprising lilts,
> both rollicking and staid,
> that grace his bishop's gait,
> like a waltzer on a pair of supple stilts
> or a Russian on parade.

Ormsby has scrutinized his fowl, found a series of droll, charming similes for it, and then—trickiest of all—caught its gait in the quick, frisky, almost nursery-rhyme movement of these lines, so different from the meditative swells and recessions quoted above. Elsewhere, flamingos are observed to have a "billiarding/ adolescent sprawl of knees" and "the silhouettes/ of parking meters," crows a "snug yarmulke," anhingas "a calisthenic finesse." Ormsby works his comic anthropomorphoses further down the food chain, too. About an ant lion's post-prandial etiquette, he notes, "There's a proprietary fussiness,/ meticulous, almost suburban, as/ the little killer scrapes his whirlpool smooth." To my taste, his animal poems are among the most delightful since Marianne Moore's.

No less discerning is Ormsby's botanical attention:

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The random meanders of the blind wood lice
cut their labyrinthine cicatrice
of cryptic squiggles in soft cambium.

Their carved grooves look like staves and
notes of scores
a cello ellipsoidally transmutes
before the main theme flitters to the flutes.
I feel these clear canals. My fingers parse

these worm trails laid bare like epigraphy.

Ormsby is a professor of Near Eastern Studies at McGill University, and it's hard not to read into lines like these a Muslim reverence for script. His whole manner of embellishment, in fact, often seems to me faintly analogous to the rippling traceries of Arabic. However hoary the metaphor of nature as an open book, Ormsby makes it work, so graceful is his handling of the trope.

One of Ormsby's most amusing gambits is to turn his microscope—and the tables with it—on his own species. He's written a series of "body part" poems, two of them found here. First, "Fingernails," which begins, "It is the patrimony of reptiles, or of birds,/ to possess such pale claws, to sport such/ little flashes of keratin at the farthest tip." As will have become apparent by now, Ormsby is obsessed with claws. Also noses:

The nose is antithetical. It sniffs,
snuffles, wallows in sneezes, then recoils
in Roman nobility, profile-proud;
pampers its fleshy shadow in bas-
reliefs; or is serenely alcoved within
rotundas where the chiseled light
dapples its expansive flanges.

Who (except perhaps Rostand) knew that noses lead such vain, complex, separate lives? Once again, I hail Ormsby's deft manipulation of sound and all it connotes, as witness the razor-fine shift, at the end of the second line, from lowliness to hauteur; with "then recoils," the poem mock-snootily hoists its beak into the Augustan air.

That Ormsby dotes on apparently unpromising objects such as lice trails, slag chunks, and his nose invites the critic to apply that treacliest, most prevalent of clichés: "the extraordinary found in the ordinary," some breathless version of which accounts for at least half the blurbs these days. But on closer inspection, his work points up just how unsatisfactory this platitude really is. For while his poems may cause us to gaze with enhanced awe at, say, our nostrils or a wood fungus, what counts—what, if anything, might be called "extraordinary"—is the nacre he secretes *around* the thing, the thing itself being no more than a sort of tailor's dummy. On some level, a bathetic relation obtains in many lyrics, and a poem like "Nose" only emphasizes the fact.

Another term one often hears bruited about lately is ecphrasis. Ormsby's memorable contribution to the genre is "Finding a Portrait of the Rugby Colonists, My Ancestors Among Them," which refers to a utopian community founded in Tennessee in 1881. The poem concludes:

Tell me, if you had been
the God who shaped their cheekbones
and their brows, the dignified alertness
of their ears, their ceremonial and
formal smiles, their throats the patience of a
May sun mottled with its little daubs of
luminance,
the fingers curved on Bibles or on canes,
the feet in their black-thronged propriety
of dainty boots or strenuous clodhoppers,
would you, for a world,
have let them tumble into
nothingness and seen their strong hearts rot,
or would you have raised them up again,
the way you rouse a sleeper or a child?

This is grand and stirring poetry. Among other things, it reminds us how much momentum and authority a well-wrought sentence can accumulate. Ormsby's syntax here feels nearly sculptural: he carves a sinuous groove down the page—a mold innocent of language, waiting for words but

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shapely in its own right—and then fills it with locutions of mixed fragility and force, like "dainty boots or strenuous clodhoppers." Emotionally, meanwhile, he strikes a tightrope balance between the curatorial and the passionate; the result is a rich, historical pathos that stops short of sentimentality.

Just as affecting are the familiar poems of Ormsby's adult life. "Blood," dedicated to his adopted sons, includes these lines:

> Blood relies
> hysterically on old school ties
>
> while our enlacements all have been made
> thread by thread, braid upon braid.

And "History," presumably about his ex-wife, stands out for its apt austerity:

> This is our history.
> The place is empty now where we began.
> The rooms are full of sunlight, and the sea
> effaces all the traces where we ran.

But when Ormsby glances back at his childhood, his focus can go soft and misty. "Rain in Childhood," "The Gossip of the Fire," and "Fragrances," to name three culprits, are too sweetly Proustian, marred by a cloying nostalgia:

> And sometimes I would hide in her
> wardrobe,
> standing among the dresses and the gowns
> as though a rush of women circled me
> with a smell of warm and fragrant skin. . . .

I have a few other disgruntlements to air, the pettiest being with Ormsby's defiantly middling titles. A stiffer charge is that he sometimes gilds his lichens, as it were. Having defended Ormsby's flourishes generally, I must also admit thinking that he falls at moments into a euphuism compounded of inkhorn vocabulary and excess alliteration. In particular, his poems can reek of early Stevens: "mute communicados," "cadaverous vermeils," and "blazon Venezuelas of lewd suavity" register as fulsome, overripe pastiches.

On the whole, however, Ormsby carries Stevens's mantle with rightness, ease, and Brummellian flair. The master's curlicues, minute textures, blend of boisterousness and dignity, and, above all, his ear for the inner harmonies of English: these have been passed on. Ormsby could justly adopt, for his own puffery, the boast he lends to the tenth-century Arabic poet Mutanabbi: "language flows/ from my fingertips and from my quill/ the way the spider tesselates its silk." But *amour-propre* isn't his tendency. Rather, he resembles

> . . . a poet who
> discovers a covert love affair between
> obstreperous syllables and then,
> cracking grandeur from the egg of shame,
> sets these
> diametric desperadoes in a pas de deux.

We don't use language—it uses us. As Karl Kraus once said, in the days when one could safely breathe such things, "My language is the common prostitute that I turn into a virgin." Ormsby's linguistic ambition is less jealous: magnanimously to sponsor—like a Frenchman, or an easygoing god—torrid liaisons, and then to eavesdrop on them. Between two words, you must play the humble Cyrano.

Selling Milton

Roy Flannagan, editor
The Riverside Milton.
Houghton Mifflin, 1,213 pages, $45

reviewed by Paul Dean

Surprising though it may be to us that a man could become famous overnight simply by writing an essay on Milton, that is what happened to young Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1825. His contribution to *The Edinburgh Review* was hailed as the definitive refutation of Johnson's notor-

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iously grumpy attack in *Lives of the Poets* (1779). Macaulay's case for Milton's importance was easy to make, and remains powerful. For three hundred years, he has been among the acknowledged masters of English poetry and polemical literature, his significance recognized by admirers and detractors alike. His poetry has profoundly influenced many subsequent poets, even those who have reacted against it. He is the nearest thing to a classical poet to have written in English, our greatest practitioner of vernacular epic, and a central figure in the transmission of the fundamental narrative of Western culture. He is, in addition, a key participant in the political world of the English Revolution, a lodestar of the Parliamentary party who was lucky to escape execution after the Restoration. You may think his personality unappealing, his record as a husband and father unimpressive, his theology illiberal insofar as it is comprehensible at all, but can you call yourself an educated person if you have never read any Milton? There he is, a great fact, a great name in literary history.

Perhaps that is the point: literary *history*. For Macaulay did not have the last word. The criticisms of Johnson, and Eliot and Leavis after him, have combined to make Milton a totem rather than a model. What contemporary poet could be said to be of his school? His style is a notorious stumbling-block. Even Macaulay noted the "extreme remoteness of the associations by means of which it acts on the reader." "His poetry," he added, "acts like an incantation"—and many have fallen asleep in consequence. Eliot judged that Milton's "gifts were essentially aural" and bracketed him with Joyce as employing a "language of his own based upon English"; Leavis described much of the verse of *Paradise Lost* as "almost as mechanical as bricklaying." Professor Flannagan may be paying less of a compliment than he supposes when he compares Milton's epic to opera. Hopkins and Bridges, Pound and Eliot, all praised the innovative metrics of *Samson Agonistes*, but Eliot's own rhythmic mastery makes Milton look naïve, and many solemn scholarly discussions of "Milton's prosody," Flannagan's included, boil down to syllable-counting of the most trivial kind. To Eliot's further criticism—blithely dismissed by Flannagan—of Milton's lack of a visual sense, some defenders have urged a baroque quality in his art, speaking of his control of mass, balanced forces, and frozen energy. This, however, is to defend abstraction by more abstraction, and will not convince those, like myself, who find baroque art a monumental bore.

Milton scholarship has mushroomed as his hold over the imaginations of ordinary people has weakened. *Paradise Lost* was once, along with Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, among the books that anyone who owned books at all was certain to possess. Those four books interpreted each other; there was no need for footnotes. Yet Flannagan is right to assume that every rough place of classical and biblical allusion must now be made plain for a barely literate generation of students. "When I ask a random English class how many of them have read the Bible through to the end," he reports, "I may see two or three hands go up, out of thirty or so." But then, religion thrives in America. Flannagan would see no hands in a class in Britain, where most undergraduates enter (and indeed leave) university without ever having read a single biblical book. In these circumstances, the provision of notes is inevitable, but sad, and a reader can hardly surrender to the sweep of the narrative if so much has to be explained before a dozen consecutive lines can be read. That said, Flannagan's commentaries, and his marginal glosses, are invariably helpful, although the typeface is uncomfortably small. He is proud of having provided camera-ready copy for the publisher, but the reader needs a magnifying glass.

Flannagan is not as much of a radical as his author, and his Milton is the one familiar from many previous editions: learned, eloquent, austere, and disputatious. Flannagan knows that "selling" Milton is

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uphill work. Accordingly, we find regrettable stylistic sops to the groundlings: the narratives in Books XI and XII of *Paradise Lost* are compared to "a series of movie montages," Pasolini's Christ is said to have been charged with being a "priggish twit," Samson is caricatured as "an over-muscular, testosterone-filled goon," as though he were Bluto in *Popeye*. The 1688 illustrations to *Paradise Lost*, which the edition reproduces, are compared to a comic book; but the works of Stan Lee put these bungling engravings completely in the chiaroscuro. There are miraculously few errors, but those are bad ones: C. A. Patrides's famous book is *Milton and the Christian Tradition*, not *Milton and the Christian Doctrine* (Flannagan gives both at different times), Thomas Arne did not write a song called "Hail, Brittania" (two mistakes in two words!), and it was King Charles I who was executed, not Charles II as is disconcertingly asserted in the introduction to *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. Among the omissions, C. H. H. Parry's "Blest Pair of Sirens" should be added to the list of musical settings of Milton.

Greater unease is caused by questionable logic: having specified the supreme importance, as artistic subjects, of Adam and Eve, the Virgin Mary, and the Crucifixion, Flannagan tells us that "Because of his Protestantism, Milton was not specially interested in the latter two." But Mary appears, to interestingly unconventional effect, in *Paradise Regained*, while whatever the peculiarities of Milton's Protestantism, they surely can't have included a lack of interest in the Crucifixion. The fact that his unfinished poem "The Passion" (c. 1630) is commonly agreed to be among his worst doesn't mean he felt the subject to be unimportant. There are, indeed, a few lines in this poem which suggest a startlingly metaphysical streak in their author:

> He sovran Priest stooping his regall head
> That dropt with odorous oil down his fair
> eyes,
> Poor fleshly Tabernacle entered,
> His starry front low-rooft beneath the skies;
> O what a Mask was there, what a
> disguise! . . .

It is exasperating that the pamphlet *On Christian Doctrine* is too hedged about with uncertainties about its authorship, text, and translation to allow us to know precisely what he believed. We can only be confident that it was unorthodox, especially about the Trinity. Not that Flannagan is much more reliable; he informs us at one point that "the Son of God . . . cannot be the ultimate human role model, because He is *at least half divine*" (my italics)! That is some achievement.

As well as the complete English and Latin poems (the latter with translations), Flannagan includes extensive selections from Milton's prose works and letters. Here there is a depressing piece of trendiness; he has "included more from the divorce tracts" than is customary because "modern readers might be more interested in the gender wisdom expressed there than, perhaps, the politics of beheading a king"! One might retort that the beheading of Charles I is one of the most important events in English history, and that, even, if the English don't recognize this, surely the citizens of the American republic ought to—especially if, as Flannagan proposes in his introduction to *Areopagitica*, Milton was "a kind of prototype American" revered by the Founding Fathers. Yet, his democracy was selective; his championship of a free press in *Areopagitica* doesn't extend to Catholics, for instance, and, as Flannagan notes, his belief in cosmic hierarchy offends many a modern egalitarian. As for "gender wisdom," Milton's domestic record does not suggest a great deal of that, though Flannagan points out that his treatment of his wives and children was less tyrannical than is sometimes believed. Overall, the prose selection is otherwise generous (one can't really complain that the staggeringly tedious *History of Britain* is omitted), and offers the chance to sample both Milton's style, characterized

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by Macaulay as "stiff with gorgeous embroidery," and his tactical cunning in debate.

One of the fascinations of Milton is that he is the first major poet who was firmly post-Shakespearean yet for whom Shakespeare still reverberated as a living voice. He was eight when Shakespeare died. Flannagan is surely right to judge that the sonnet "On Shakespeare" has been overpraised; the real Shakespearean influence comes in "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," and above all in the temptation scene in *Comus*, where Milton's language takes on a kind of wanton buoyancy it was never to show again. Between the publication of *Poems* (1646) and *Paradise Lost* (1667) the world of Shakespeare (the last great medieval writer) had been destroyed, the modern world had begun, and Shakespeare may have come to seem merely frivolous to a man so politically *engagé* as Milton. For whatever reasons, his initial sympathy with the Shakespeare of the comedies and romances waned, and although there are touches of the Shakespearean tragic protagonist in Satan, Flannagan overstates the case in comparing him to Claudius and Macbeth. The theological temper of the epics is quite un-Shakespearean—as is, indeed, the very ambition to write an epic—while it is hard to remember, while reading *Samson Agonistes*, that Shakespearean drama ever existed.

Flannagan, like most recent scholars, dates *Samson* late in Milton's career. The evidence for this is not conclusive and is partly impressionistic; one feels it is a strongly autobiographical piece. Like Samson, Milton was surrounded by his political enemies, blind, and misogynistic: this prompted an unusually close engagement with his material. Repelling all outward criticism, resisting all self-doubt, the hero fulfills his vocation, true to his destiny, realizing it was for that consummation that his apparent failure had occurred.

> *Samson* hath quit himself
> Like *Samson*, and heroicly hath finish'd
> A life Heroic . . .

Flannagan wants the piece to be more than it is; despite his assertion that "no other tragedy ends with such a desolate event," clearly the catharsis Milton prescribes for us at the end of his play is quite different from the bewilderment we experience at the end of *King Lear*. There is a finality of closure about *Samson Agonistes* which marks it off from Shakespearean tragedy and even from its nearest relatives in English: the Elizabethan closet dramas of Mary Herbert or Samuel Daniel, which are more interested in tension than in resolution. Milton had quit himself like Milton. *Samson* forms an extraordinary coda to his work (it was unfairly slighted by Leavis, I think). Its power is not easy to explain, but there is a somber and bleak magnificence about it to which I find myself returning more often than I do to the epics.

Are we able to recover a sense of the importance of Milton, to give him a real value in an age so remote from his own? The eighteenth-century epic poets paid him the dubious tribute of emulation in some of the deadliest productions in English literature; only Pope in *The Dunciad* was able to make a really creative reworking. Matthew Arnold glorified him, ironically, as an imperialist, a fine specimen of "this English race" which "overspreads the world." That is an embarrassment, and Arnold's using Milton to rebuke Shakespeare's lack of "sureness of perfect style" is pompous nonsense. The objections of Eliot and Leavis are difficult to refute, but perhaps they are damaging rather than lethal. After all, Eliot paid an oblique tribute in "Sweeney Agonistes," while Leavis famously carried his Milton with him during World War I (it was the only verse, he said, which withstood the sound of the gun-batteries), and repeatedly denied that he was saying Milton was not worth reading. Milton arouses strong, sometimes contradictory feelings; it is rare for him to provoke mere apathy—William Empson, a fierce opponent of Christianity, wrote one of the best books on him—and that in itself means he is a living writer. Professor Flannagan's edition, with all its

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faults, will preserve that status. Milton asks, and certainly deserves, a fair hearing. He was not a bibliolater, but he understood the persuasive power, the potential iconoclasm, of literature. ". . . As good almost kill a Man," he wrote in *Areopagitica*, "as kill a good book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye."

The curse of the Irish

Anthony Cronin No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien. Fromm International, 272 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Richard Tillinghast

My guess is that the phrase "the luck of the Irish" is of American origin. When one contemplates the lives that some of the best Irish writers have led in and out of the pubs of Dublin during the past half-century or so, "curse" comes to mind as a better word than "luck." Hence the sobering title of Anthony Cronin's superb biography, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*, published in London almost a decade ago and recently released here.

O'Brien, a novelist and satirist, was actually three in one—an entity the novelist Dermot Bolger has called "that wondrous multi-layered mind which singularly comprised the Unholy Trinity of Flann O'Brien, Brian O'Nolan and Myles na Gopaleen." Can any other writer—or any other person—have gone by so many different names over the course of a lifetime? Myles (one instinctively wants to call him by the first name of the *nom de plume* he adopted for the long-running column he wrote for *The Irish Times* starting in 1940) was born into the riverrun of modern Ireland in 1911. Cronin's "life and times" approach is fitting, because a writer of O'Brien's cut is imaginable only in a country that could never quite make up its mind exactly what it was. Those were days when Joyce, and then Beckett, exercised a colossal absence from their self-imposed exile in Paris, when Brendan Behan was playing the stage Irishman in New York and Dublin, when Myles and the poet Patrick Kavanagh were twin eminences who between them dominated Dublin's literary pubs.

Irish was—by the choice of his father, an upper-level civil servant—the language of the household in which the young Brian O'Nolan grew up. This linguistic decision represented a patriotic cultural gesture—not unusual among the educated middle-class families of the emerging nation, who turned their backs on the language of their English nemesis. When he himself became a civil servant, the subject of this biography was sometimes Brian O'Nolan and sometimes Brian O Nualláin. Though he came to loathe the civil service, his job became a necessity: his father died young, and it fell on O'Nolan's shoulders to support a family of twelve. Though drink was at first a recreation, no doubt his later dependence on it owed something to the tedium of his job, much of which involved sitting in the Dáil, or Irish parliament, listening to the tedious speeches of politicians: "For some seven years my duty as a Private Secretary necessitated almost daily attendance at Leinster House. Garrulity is a feeble word to describe what I encountered in Dáil Eireann. . . ." When one of his superiors in the civil service warned him avuncularly about his increasingly frequent recourse to a public house near his office—"You were seen going into the Scotch House"—O'Nolan replied, "You mean I was seen coming into the Scotch House." He died in his mid-fifties from throat cancer brought on by a lifetime of heavy drinking and smoking.

O'Nolan emerges from Cronin's account as an example of a classic Dublin type seen not uncommonly even today: the disappointed man. During the years of life that are the most productive for many people, O'Nolan went through a creative silence during which he wrote no fiction, a period

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that lasted twenty years. He wrote his popular newspaper column under the Irish name Myles na Gopaleen, who was the stage-Irish hero of a play by Dion Boucicault. The name means "Myles of the little ponies"—and perhaps O'Nolan intended a playful bilingual pun on the little noggins of whiskey he liked to carry around in his pockets when he went to *The Irish Times* offices and to the racetrack, or on the race horses he followed avidly.

His column, "The Cruiskeen Lawn" ("Little Brimming Jug"), enjoyed iconic status among Irish readers. The column's popularity must have had something to do with its cynical wit, which expressed the letdown many people felt upon finding that the euphoria of Independence did not last —an instance of national postpartum depression. One of O'Brien's books, *An Béal Bocht* ("The Hungry Mouth"), has in the last few years lent its name to a popular pub in the Bronx which functions as a literary center for recent immigrants and other lovers of Irish poetry. The contemporary heir of "The Cruiskeen Lawn" is the column "Nights And Days in Garavans," written by the fictional Morgan O'Doherty (Jeff O'Connell) for the *Galway Advertiser*.

And yet, brilliant as it is, the Cruiskeen Lawn appears not to have satisfied its author, who was a novelist of startling originality. Patrick Kavanagh's repeated judgment may have been right: "That poor little na gCopaleen [Kavanagh uses the pedantic form of the genitive plural that Myles had at first favored when signing his columns] has never found a myth that would carry all the stuff in his column, that would lift it on to a creative plane."

Since Irish was his first language, it is not hard to see why his disillusionment about *an teanga*, the (Irish) tongue, would have hit O'Nolan so hard. "It is common knowledge," Myles observed bitterly, satirizing Eamon de Valera's vision of an Ireland where happy Gaelic-speaking peasants farmed blissfully and comely maidens danced at the crossroads, "that certain categories of Irish speakers are boors. They (being men) have nuns' faces, wear bicycle clips continuously, talk in Irish only about *ceist na teanga* and have undue confidence in Irish dancing as a general national prophylactic. . . ." Perhaps saddest of all, O'Nolan was not even able to acknowledge his masterpiece, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, dismissing it as "mere juvenilia." The book, which appeared in 1939, might lay claim to being the first postmodernist novel written in English. Its title contains a literal translation of a place-name from the Irish. Graham Greene neatly summed up its plot as follows: "you have (a) a book about a man called Trellis who is (b) writing a book about certain characters who (c) are turning the tables on Trellis by writing about him." Trellis loses control over his characters only when he falls asleep. These devices, which would seem to owe something to Gide and Pirandello, have much less novelty value today than they had then. But unlike today's postmodernism, O'Brien's book has the freshness and sprightliness of a joke being told for the first time. For me the delight and charm of the book lie not so much in its overall premise, but in the author's brilliance as a satirist and parodist. In one character, Finn MacCool, O'Brien parodies the ancient Irish poetry he would have read in school, which can only speak in high, traditional style of matters such as the wanderings of the mad king Sweeny. This mixes hilariously with the other characters' more mundane interests. Here are the characters of Trellis's novel talking among themselves:

> I will relate, said Finn.
>
> We're off again, said Furriskey.
>
> The first matter that I will occupy with honey-words and melodious recital, said Finn, is the reason and the first cause for Sweeny's frenzy.
>
> Draw in your chairs, boys, said Shanahan, we're right for the night. We're away in a hack.

Hilariously, Finn's interlocutors, ordinary middle-class Dubliners, tolerate Finn as a harmless long-winded eccentric. O'Brien's parodies of their own garrulousness are

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exact and delightful. He captures the repetitiveness and unconscious buffoonery of their speech with unerringly precise mimicry. Shanahan glosses one of Finn's tales as follows:

> The upshot is that your man becomes a bloody bird.
>
> I see, said Lamont.
>
> Do you see it, Mr. Furriskey, said Shanahan. What happens? He is changed into a bird for his pains and he could go from here to Carlow in one hop. . . .
>
> That was always one thing, said Shanahan wisely, that the Irish race was always noted for, one place where the world had to give us best. With all his faults and by God he has plenty, the Irishman can jump. By God he can jump. That's one thing the Irish race is honored for no matter where it goes or where you find it—jumping. The world looks to us there.

The best comedians are, famously, often the saddest men. In a column written less than a month before his death, Myles wrote that anybody "who has the courage to raise his eyes and look sanely at the awful human condition . . . must realize finally that tiny periods of temporary release from intolerable suffering is the most that any individual has the right to expect." Cronin notes, "He died peacefully and rather unexpectedly on 1 April 1966, April Fools' Day."

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Notebook

Reporting Nuremberg

by Carl Rollyson

On November 20, 1945, twenty-four individuals stood in the dock at Nuremberg, accused of waging aggressive wars, establishing slave labor, exterminating racial and religious groups, and other crimes against humanity. Twelve defendants were sentenced to death by hanging, seven received prison terms ranging from ten years to life, and three were acquitted. The highest ranking condemned man, Hermann Goering, Hitler's second-in-comand and the most flamboyant and unyielding defendant in the dock, committed suicide just hours before his scheduled execution. As Telford Taylor, a Nuremberg prosecutor and historian of the trials, remarks, bringing these notable Nazis, and later other military and civilian criminals, to justice was a profound advance in international penal law ratified by the United Nations. But the Nuremberg precedent met with a good deal of ambivalence and doubt, since the trials were conducted by the victors in war and the courtroom was suffused with the personalities not only of the defendants and their prosecutors, but also of the journalists who bore witness to the proceedings.

As reporters covering the Nuremberg trials, Martha Gellhorn, Janet Flanner, and Rebecca West are of continuing interest for their accounts of what took place. Of the three, only Martha Gellhorn had been a war correspondent. In part, this turn of events was the product of timing. Gellhorn was born in 1908. As a writer, she was approaching her prime during the Spanish Civil War, and her experiences there equipped her magnificently for her role in reporting World War II (recently recognized in the Library of America's collection of World War II journalism). Also, the idea of the engaged writer, pioneered by Stephen Crane and apotheosized by Ernest Hemingway, had an enormous influence on Gellhorn, growing up in St. Louis and yearning by her twelfth year for adventure abroad. Janet Flanner and Rebecca West (both born in 1892) came a generation earlier and emerged from the Gilded Age and the Edwardian era, periods which saw figures such as Mark Twain and H. G. Wells enlivening English prose and making it a supple weapon against the status quo.

The lives and writings of these three women converged and diverged in fascinating and instructive ways. Gellhorn knew Flanner and West; indeed, Gellhorn became (briefly) H. G. Wells's mistress, a fact that Rebecca West (who earlier had a ten-year affair with Wells) never knew. Gellhorn and West visited Germany frequently in the early 1930s, witnessed the rise of Nazism, become Germanophobes, and realized immediately that the world was headed for another war. All three women were published in *The New Yorker*, although Gellhorn's regular beat was *Collier's Magazine*. All three women were Francophiles, Flanner spending nearly her whole writing life reporting on France for *The New Yorker*, and

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much of West's postwar reporting on treason trials appeared at the instigation of the magazine's editor, Harold Ross. In fact, Ross assigned West to cover the Nuremberg trials when he found they did not suit Flanner—who admitted (somewhat enviously) that West's reporting was better than her own. Curiously, all three women were at Nuremberg and yet did not meet. They shared much as journalists, yet their reports on Nuremberg reflect different tempers and styles—Gellhorn, the war correspondent, concerned with the unfolding of events; Flanner, the analyst, exploring subtleties of character and nuances of atmosphere; and West, the dramatist of treason trials, probing the ethical implications of human behavior.

For all three, one disturbing figure dominates Nuremberg: Hermann Goering. Of the twenty-one defendants, he is the only one to open his mind and to cast its contents defiantly into the courtroom. His fellow defendants and their lawyers build their cases around him, Flanner observes. He is their bastion, a star, sometimes resembling an "aging, fat tenor," sometimes a "middle-aged, fleshy contralto." Goering makes an aria out of the sellout of Europe, reminding his accusers of how they had to let it go, country by country. Goering exudes power; he does not defer everything to the Führer. The Anschluss and Munich were Goering's doing; Danzig was the Führer's. In twenty-one hours of testimony, Goering gives a guided tour of what Flanner calls the "most cynical military period in Europe's history." Economics, diplomacy, war—Goering covers it all, with savage humor, little remorse, and no conscience. Noting how he punctuates his bravura performance with his large white waving hands, Flanner has no trouble imagining how he has torn apart millions of lives.

Goering's triumph would be less shattering if he had not also made Robert Jackson, Justice of the United States Supreme Court, one of his victims. Jackson had opened the trials with a noble, stirring defense of the Nuremberg idea: that there were crimes against humanity that could not go unpunished. But face-to-face with evil, Jackson lacks the ideas and the personality to match Goering's:

> JACKSON: Now, was this Leadership Principle supported and adopted by you in Germany because you believed that no people are capable of self-government, or because you believed that some may be, not the German people; or that no matter whether some of us are capable of using our own system, it should not be allowed in Germany?
>
> GOERING: I beg your pardon, I did not quite understand the question, but I could perhaps answer it as follows: I consider the Leadership Principle necessary because the system which previously existed, and which we called parliamentary or democratic, had brought Germany to the verge of ruin. I might perhaps in this connection remind you that your own President Roosevelt, as far as I can recall—I do not want to quote it word for word—declared, "Certain peoples in Europe have forsaken democracy, not because they did not wish for democracy as such, but because democracy had brought forth men who were too weak to give their people work and bread, and to satisfy them. For this reason the peoples have abandoned this system and the men belonging to it." There is much truth in that statement. This system had brought ruin by mismanagement and according to my own opinion, only an organization made up of a strong, clearly defined leadership hierarchy could restore order again. But, let it be understood, not against the will of the people, but only when the people, having in the course of time, and by means of a series of elections, grown stronger and stronger, had expressed their wish to entrust their destiny to the National Socialist leadership.

The Reichsmarschall outmaneuvers the Justice, exhibiting a keener memory and a firmer grasp of Nazi and European history. Flanner thinks the shrewd Goering absolutely diabolical in "drawing on American

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and English history for familiar paradoxes and damaging precedents." Even the best legal minds are flummoxed by his "fantastic and formidable personality." Physically, Jackson seems to shrink in Goering's presence; his habit of unbuttoning his coat, whisking it back over his hips, and sticking his hands in his back pockets reminds Flanner of a country lawyer out of his depth.

A relieved Flanner watches the more skillful British chief prosecutor, Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, corner Goering, getting him to acknowledge the "difference between the glorified Nazi plan and the ghastly human results." Even better, the blunt Russian chief prosecutor, Roman Andreyevich Rudenko, handles Goering roughly, reminding him and the court of the Nazis' atrocities. But Flanner's conclusion is troubling: not much has been done really to establish the principles of Nuremberg. Rather, it is the German obsession with record-keeping that has allowed the Allies to convict the Nazis; they have convicted themselves with their own documents.

Martha Gellhorn comes to Nuremberg a battle-hardened veteran. She has traveled with Allied soldiers of many nationalities who have pushed the Nazis up and out of Italy. She has seen the Normandy beaches shortly after the invasion. She has been to Dachau. She knows Nuremberg is right. For her, the Reichsmarschall is a has-been actor, described in the past tense: "Goering's terrible mouth wore a smile that was not a smile, but only a habit the lips had taken." Goering's puffy performances rebound off Gellhorn as though she is granite. All the defendants are similarly diminished: "These twenty-one men, these nothings, these industrious and once-confident monsters are the last left alive of that small gang which had ruled Germany." The awesome Goering and his lot (as Flanner sees them) are dispatched, a pathetic heap. Except for his "terrible mouth," Gellhorn gives him no dominating characteristic—indeed she does not describe him at all.

Gellhorn sees a courtroom that a reader of Flanner could not imagine:

> Everything about the trial at Nuremberg was unique in history; everything happened for the first time. Everyone present seemed to know that history was being made; everyone seemed to feel that responsibility and find it heavy.

The absoluteness of Gellhorn's prose situates her on solid ground immeasurably distant from Flanner's tentative terrain. The courtroom has a grandeur because it is reestablishing the rule of law. Lord Justice Geoffrey Lawrence, president of the tribunal, speaks in a "slow, careful, and immensely quiet voice." Listening to him "reading without haste or passion, . . . You felt the dignity and modesty of the man. . . . That voice was speaking for history," Gellhorn concludes. She easily slips into the second person, having no doubt that she feels what you would feel had you been there. Listening to Lord Justice Lawrence, you feel, Gellhorn implies, that the verdict of the court is virtually divine.

Gellhorn has no illusions that Nuremberg will make the world a better place. But it is the least that can be done. By the end of her report, Goering is an evil memory, the flaws and failures in the court proceedings are not even mentioned. What is important is that "four nations could work patiently together to brand evil and reaffirm the power and the goodness of honest law."

Rebecca West arrives in Nuremberg later than Flanner and Gellhorn. The trials are almost over. But she is an old hand at trials and will soon publish a book about them, *The Meaning of Treason*. Goering fascinates her. She too fastens on his mouth, on his "wide and woodenish lips." She refers to his "smiling wooden mask." He is the bit of a fake that Gellhorn portrays but also considerably like the demonic force that Flanner pictures. He is a man of enormous appetite. West imagines:

> If he were given the chance, he would walk out of the Palace of Justice, take over Germany again, and turn it into a stage for the

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> enactment of his governing fantasy, which is so strong that it fills the air around him with its images, so madly private that those images are beyond the power of those who see them to interpret them.

West also finds something soft and peculiarly sexual about Goering—not homosexual, she adds, "but when his humor is good, he recalls the madam of a brothel."

Throughout her Nuremberg report, West combines the psychological and political, giving each their due, and consequently she provides a rounded, complex reading of history. Like so many of the characters she portrayed in her fiction and nonfiction, the Reichsmarschall is full of life and death. When he balloons in importance, she brings him back to earth. The sense of corruption, of everything for sale, pulses with life in West's portrait. Goering made a whore of history, and he himself had the figure, the dress, and the makeup for the role:

> He wears either a German air-force uniform or a light beach suit in the worst of playful taste, and both hang loosely on him, giving him an air of pregnancy. He has thick brown young hair, the coarse, bright skin of an actor who has used grease paint for decades, and the preternaturally deep wrinkles of the drug addict; it adds up to something like the head of a ventriloquist's dummy.

West had a fabled knack for taking her subject's measure, for using biography to suggest social, sexual, psychological, and historical significance. Goering had met his match.

In *A Train of Powder*, which contains West's most important writing on postwar Germany, she transforms Nuremberg into the story of the German imagination, of its penchant for fairy tales and overbuilding, its Wagnerian dreams of grandeur, which contribute to the excesses of Nazism. In a *Schloss*, an old nineteenth-century mansion, she finds a metaphor for this Germanic need to overproduce and to dominate. She expects the mansion's greenhouse to be like the English variety, "a desert place of shabby and unpainted staging, meagerly set out with a diminished store of seed boxes. Instead, it is neat, clean, full of plants, and perfect, flourishing in the hands of a crippled gardener's single-minded devotion prophetic of Germany's rebirth." The scene at the Nuremberg *Schloss* becomes West's own tribute to and warning about the self-dedication and dynamism of German culture, which she regards as a great force for both good and evil. She knows that Germans are perfectly capable of transforming their fairy tale desire for a happy ending into "Lear's kingdom of loss."

Like Gellhorn, West believed in Nuremberg's importance, but like Flanner, she could not gainsay its failures. Although she believed that the trials made a profound statement, settling once and for all that crimes against humanity should be punished, the Nuremberg judges, she realized, were compromised. Some of the indictable crimes, such as unrestricted submarine warfare, had also been committed by the Allies. American and British judicial procedures baffled the German attorneys, who did not understand the role of cross-examination, because in Germany judges took an active role in questioning witnesses. "The trouble about Nuremberg," she wrote in *A Train of Powder*, was that it was so manifestly a part of life as it is lived; the trial had not sufficiently detached itself from the oddity of the world." Neither does West's account detach itself from the oddity of the world, nor from the politics of war or the desire to make sense of it all. The brilliance of West's report on Nuremberg is that it so manifestly evokes the trials as they were conducted. Unlike Flanner, West does not retreat from the trials' problematic denouement; unlike Gellhorn, she does not evade their ambiguities.

It is to West that writers return, with the fiftieth anniversary of the Nuremberg trials just past, and with the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia still unresolved. Whether it is Telford Taylor in *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials* (1993) invoking *A Train of*

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Powder, or Robert Kaplan in *Balkan Ghosts* (1993) producing a scaled-down version of her great epic, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), West has become a touchstone.

In my biography of West, *Rebecca West: A Life* (1996), I call her career a saga of the century. As a novelist, biographer, literary critic, journalist, early feminist, and staunch anti-Communist, she writes about the shaping of contemporary consciousness, seen through the eyes of an Englishwoman—as she refers to herself in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. It is, paradoxically, this very personal and yet historical voice that makes her unique and still relevant. She is not afraid to speak for herself and for history. Few writers would approach Yugoslavia, Nuremberg—or any other subject for that matter—daring to assume such authority.

What would West have to say today as the world once again tries to bring war criminals to justice? The West is just as compromised now as it was at the end of World War II. She had spent the 1930s arguing against appeasers and isolationists, and then watched her beloved Yugoslavia be torn apart and her own country bombed. She would not now abide standing aside because the various peoples of Yugoslavia have been in conflict since the fourteenth century. She loved the polyglot, multicultural confluences of Yugoslavia and would have rejected any effort to partition the country into ethnic enclaves.

Today, West might well quote that famous passage from *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*:

> Only part of us is sane: only part of us loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to our nineties and die in peace, in a house that we have built, that shall shelter those who come after us. The other half of us is nearly mad. . . . This fight can be observed constantly in our personal lives.

West had a gift for bringing history home, for showing how it functions in our daily lives. In her eyes, humanity's self-destructiveness does not make everyone Nazis, but in the passage above she explains how it is that a Goering could triumph. He could speak to that mad, warlike self that has made of Yugoslavia a holocaust. West had examined her darker nature and ours. She understood that both individuals and civilizations had constantly to strive for sanity and that Nuremberg was part of that struggle. It was not only a trial of the accused but also a trial of those who witnessed it. Now, as then, West's argument is that we must exercise judgment on crimes against humanity precisely because we ourselves are prone to committing them.

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Letters

Shades of Gray

To the Editors:
In "Marxism as Farce" (Notes & Comments, June 1998) you point out that my friend John Gray, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* in May, found much more merit and originality in Karl Marx's baroque political and economic fantasies than can be seen by the naked eye. I emphatically agree.

However, you do misread a passage from Gray's essay which you quote: "It is a mistake to think that Soviet planning failed because it was not implemented by a democratic government. The truth is nearer the opposite. The Soviet system lacked working democratic institutions because the failure of social planning necessitated tyranny." This means (a) that central planning did not fail for lack of democracy and (b) that its failure made non-democratic government imperative if the regime was to continue. It does not imply, as you suggest, that Gray believes that Lenin and Trotsky would have instituted democracy under any circumstances. Gray would agree, as I do, that "democratic institutions never were an integral part of Lenin's vision of the Marxist state."

Dr. Ernest van den Haag
New York, N.Y.

The Editors reply:
Far from clarifying John Gray's observations about Soviet planning, etc., Dr. van den Haag's letter merely restates them. This may be a testimony to their friendship, but it does nothing to advance the discussion.

Southern literature

To the Editors:
I have not read and do not know if Norton's *The Literature of the American South* is a good or bad anthology. I do know, however, that Richard Tillinghast in his review of the book sorely misses the point about racism in the South. Mr. Tillinghast would have us believe that the Civil War was primarily a "brave war against terrifying odds in defense of [the South's] impoverished and embattled homeland." It was waged, apparently, by a gullible North after Lincoln's "brilliant public relations" ploy to cast the war in terms of slavery. Yes, the "white South did not and does not on the whole see . . . the Civil War as a war against slavery." How did and does the black South see it? Mr. Tillinghast never asks.

He does say that he and "millions of other Southerners saw [Robert E.] Lee" not as "a slave owner but an exemplary Christian gentleman . . . who gave us something to feel proud about during the decades of economic ruin and loss of status that followed the war." But the truth is that not only was that kindly Christian gentleman a slave holder, he *led* the four year campaign in which six hundred thousand people died so that the South, in its quest for self-determination, might continue to own dark-skinned humans. Tillinghast is proud that there is now

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"little support among decent people in the South for racial discrimination" but never makes the connection that this would not have been possible had Marse Robert triumphed.

I suggest Mr. Tillinghast dust off the "tintype print of Robert E. Lee mounted on Traveler that hung in [his] dining room" and reapply his "Impeach Earl Warren" bumper sticker. Just as a Venetian law in *The Merchant of Venice* protects only "Christian blood" and does not consider people other than Christians worthy of protection, Mr. Tillinghast, 133 years later, still sees the Civil War only in terms of a beleaguered white Confederacy. The South is risible again.

Steve Kronen
Miami, Fla.

Richard Tillinghast replies:

Most historians agree that for Northern industrial and commercial interests, the Civil War was about protective tariffs and an attempt to bring Southern cotton to New England textile mills rather than to Britain and France. Abolitionists at first met bitter opposition among New England's power elite. Lincoln sold the war to his constituency as a battle to preserve the Union, not to free the slaves. Remember that the Emancipation Proclamation originally applied only to slaves living in the Confederacy, not in the Union. While the rich slave-owners of states like South Carolina precipitated secession, the brunt of the suffering and dying fell on ordinary Southerners, most of whom had little stake in the institution of slavery. Mr. Kronen is mistaken in believing that these people fought so that the South "might continue to own dark-skinned humans." They fought to repel an invasion. His reference to "Marse Robert" is one more reminder of the national desire to see the South in terms of caricature. I am surprised that Mr. Kronen failed to invoke Li'l Abner, the Beverly Hillbillies, and Jubilation T. Cornpone. For readers who wish to get a better idea of what the Civil War was like for the majority of Southerners, I recommend the recent novel *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier. Mr. Kronen's attempts to link the sentiments expressed in my review to anti-Semitism and the "Impeach Earl Warren" campaign are too pathetic to merit a reply.

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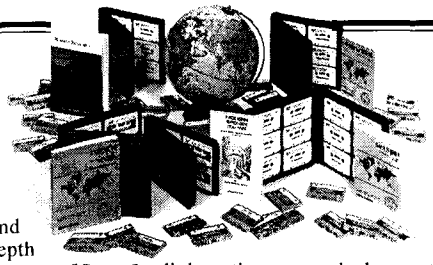

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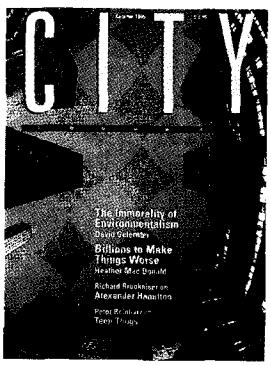

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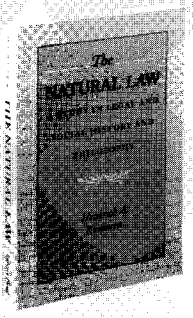

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Heinrich Rommen (1897–1967) taught in Germany and England before concluding his distinguished scholarly career at Georgetown University.

Russell Hittinger is professor of philosophy and law at the University of Tulsa.

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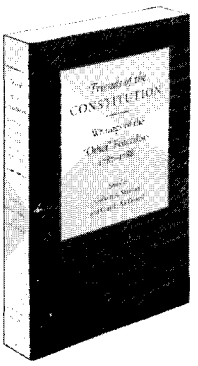

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